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Everyday Constructions of Class-Based Inequality: Field Effects in UK Museum Work

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journals.sagepub.com/home/soc**Samantha Evans** 

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Abstract

This article contributes to our understanding of how occupational contexts shape everyday constructions of class-based inequality. Using Bourdieu's concept of field, and UK museum work as a case, we analyse interview, focus group and secondary data. We show how those with a stake in museum work construct three versions of class-based inequality: (1) between individuals; (2) between positions; and (3) between institution and worker. The museum field provides a familiar space that can aid 'recognition' of inequality between individuals. Conversely the field generates a logic – here, *keeping collections special* – which can legitimate structural inequality between positions. It also facilitates a game-playing dynamic that leads to a 'pragmatic acceptance' and reinforcement of inequality between institution and worker. Visibility of class-based inequality is shaped by misdirection rather than misrecognition, as well as one's position in the hierarchy.

Keywords

Bourdieu, class, class-based inequality, field, inequality, museums

Introduction

Inequality is a pressing social and economic issue and a continuing focus of sociological research (Savage, 2021). The depth and persistence of the structures of advantage and disadvantage are particularly troubling aspects of inequality (Lamont and Pierson, 2019), with class an 'essential point of orientation for sociology if it is to grasp the problem of inequality today' (Tyler, 2015: 493). However, while there is good evidence of the impact

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of class-based inequality on people's lives, our understanding of how people make sense of it in everyday (as opposed to scholarly) contexts is rather thin and disconnected (Bottero, 2020). This is important as it is only through everyday recognition (and sociology's understanding of such recognition) that class-based inequalities can be tackled (Andersen et al., 2021).

Traditional research has tended to focus on how people do not see class-based inequality in the same way that researchers do (Andersen et al., 2021; Savage, 2021). Participants for example misperceive the extent and shape of economic inequalities in survey responses (Bottero, 2020). When estimating different incomes, such as chief executive officer (CEO) and unskilled factory worker, respondents wildly underestimate or overestimate the gap (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018). One explanation for this 'restricted view' (Bottero, 2020: 1) is methodological, as survey research tends to privilege pre-constructed categories over the subjective views of the researched (Andersen et al., 2021).

A more recent approach takes an inductive view, privileging how people do see class-based inequality. This shows the important role that context plays in situating everyday constructions of inequality, in particular, how cultural scripts shape constructions of class-based inequality as structural or individualised (Andersen et al., 2021). We respond to calls to examine how people construct class-based inequality within an occupational setting (Bottero, 2004; Moore and Taylor, 2020), sites that both reproduce structural inequalities (Crompton, 2008), and the cultural scripts, such as a 'myth of meritocracy' by which such inequalities are legitimised (Amis et al., 2020). Specifically, we present an inductive empirical analysis of how those with a stake in UK museum work construct class-based inequality in relation to their field. Cultural industries are shown to be characterised by persistent structural inequalities (McAndrew et al., 2024). Museums, with their salient role in maintaining class-based distinctions, are a significant (but under-researched) location for examining how people make sense of class-based inequality (Bennett et al., 2009).

We adopt a discursive, inductive approach, avoiding pre-constructed categories (hence using the term 'class-based'). We combine this with a Bourdieusian lens, viewing class as multi-dimensional, descriptive of and shaped by different social relations (Bourdieu, 1987) and using Bourdieu's (1993) concept of field as a dynamic social space. This approach enables us to show how field logics and dynamics shape everyday constructions of class-based inequality and make the following empirical and conceptual contributions:

- We delineate multiple relational dimensions by which class-based inequality is constructed in an occupational context showing this to be between individuals, between positions and between institution and worker. This moves beyond debates over what is class, to what is 'classed', facilitating a pluralistic view, a more nuanced analysis of the role of context and providing a useful heuristic for practitioners and researchers in tackling inequality.
- We show empirically how class-based inequality is constructed as a problem within UK museum work, demonstrating how the field influences these constructions. The

field illuminates class-based inequality as a problem ‘between individuals’ emanating from beyond, but its logic and dynamics can direct attention away from the structural inequalities between positions and institution and worker (we call this ‘misdirection’). Importantly, we show how stake and position in the field shape how individuals view class-based inequality.

- We provide empirical support for how class-based inequalities become ‘misrecognised’ in occupational contexts. We advance support for Bourdieu’s version of ‘misrecognition’ (Bottero, 2020; Burawoy, 2019) based on a process of ‘misdirection’ and ‘pragmatic acceptance’ rooted in the ‘game-playing’ of the field rather than a pre-conscious socialisation.

Everyday Constructions of Class-Based Inequality

As Tyler (2015: 493) argues, ‘the problem that class describes is inequality’. Our focus therefore is on class as a way of describing inequality rather than a way of categorising people. We use the term ‘everyday’ to mean contexts that are not scholarly (some might use the term ‘lay’). Our choice of ‘everyday’ is to direct attention to context rather than categorising individuals. We also use the term class-based rather than class. This acknowledges the diverse and contested theoretical accounts of class that focus on different relations shaped by economic and/or cultural power. Traditional Marxian and Weberian analyses view class as an objective economic category; inequality a question of exploitation within relations of production (Marx) or exclusion from the market (Weber) (Crompton, 2008). Bourdieusian approaches view class as both economic and cultural; recognisable as an explicit identity constructed between individuals, but less recognisable as a ‘classed’ (i.e. structural) feature of occupational hierarchies or relations of production (Bottero, 2004; Sayer, 2011). Inequality from a Bourdieusian lens involves economic and cultural domination; groups with most capital not only secure powerful positions but construct this as natural and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1989, 1993). This lens aligns with our inductive, social constructionist approach.

Recent research shows how everyday constructions of class-based inequality are shaped by context at different levels. Irwin (2018) argues her UK participants are sophisticated analysts making sense of class-based inequality in relation to contexts meaningful to them (family, local community and personal biography). Class-based inequality is seen as shaped by both structural conditions (e.g. provision of university places) and personal agency (Irwin, 2018). Andersen et al. (2021) develop these ideas showing how Lamont and Pierson’s (2019) macro, meso, micro and temporal contexts shape views of inequality. Macro contexts generate cultural scripts such as the American Dream or Danish ‘social arv’ (social inheritance), which direct attention to individual or structural issues respectively. Meso-level contexts provide familiar settings exposing people to the privileges of others. Micro-level context is an individual’s own lived experience, which, over time, confirms or disappoints one’s view of society being meritocratic. Context matters, particularly how people understand it as a cause of inequality.

We respond to calls to investigate how meso-level contexts, specifically occupational sectors, shape everyday constructions of class-based inequality (Andersen

et al., 2021). Occupational sectors produce hierarchical distinctions between different work, which legitimate distributive (who gets what) and contributive (who does what) inequalities (Sayer, 2011). Contemporary workplaces are also sites that generate unequal employment relations (Moore and Taylor, 2020). Research into occupational settings highlights the continuing relevance of class-based inequality for contemporary workers (e.g. Friedman and Laurison, 2019); however, emphasis tends to be on examining individualised constructions of class which pre-exist the workplace (an exception is Moore and Taylor, 2020), rather than the workplace as a source of class-based inequality.

Bourdieu, Field and Misrecognition

Our focus is examining the relationship between everyday constructions of class-based inequalities and occupational context, using Bourdieu's conceptual framework. Bourdieu's (1987, 1993) approach is valuable as he understands class as a malleable and multi-dimensional construct, shaped by those with power to 'class-make' such as scholars or politicians. He argues that, while class identities are often recognisable as everyday forms of cultural distinction (e.g. accent, qualifications, cultural consumption), the historic, structural processes that produce and maintain hierarchies – that is, the unfair possession of economic power within relations of production – often go unrecognised as a form of inequality (Bottero, 2004; Sayer, 2011). Bourdieu's approach has gained currency with researchers to show that while 'class' may not be explicit as an identity, 'classed' processes nonetheless persist (Bottero, 2004).

Bourdieu's concept of field is particularly useful for analysing everyday constructions of class-based inequality within an occupational context (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012). Bourdieu likens the field to a game, its boundaries defined by those willing to play. A field is driven by an historic logic, a cultural script distinguishing it from other fields and shaping hierarchical structures and practices within, such as '*arts for art's sake*' (Bourdieu, 1993: 40, emphasis in original). This logic shapes how capital is valued within the field. Capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) is the currency by which individuals and institutions 'play the game', the struggle for position. Symbolic capital is that which is recognised and valued within a field; for example, exhibiting paintings in a certain gallery in the art field. By pursuing such symbolic capital, 'playing the game', individuals and institutions reinforce the logic and hierarchies of the field (Bourdieu, 1989, 1993). Field thus provides the conceptual mechanism to analyse an occupational setting not just as a neutral space, but a dynamic site in which individuals and institutions have a stake and compete for valued positions (Bourdieu, 1987, 1989, 1993).

Bourdieu's framework enables us to examine how some forms of class-based inequality are more recognisable to some individuals and not others. By conceptualising the field as a game, individuals with less of the 'right sort' of capital may construct the field as unequal. Scholars show that people from working-class backgrounds describe how their accent, educational background and dress-sense can make them feel like they do not fit in and act as barriers to roles in professions such as acting, accounting, architecture (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Conversely, this form of class-based inequality may be less visible to those in higher positions, whose own forms of capital fit with what has become accepted as

a normative standard. For example, those in senior positions in accounting and professional services legitimise seeking certain types of capital, using seemingly neutral discourses such as ‘polish’ or ‘talent’ (Ashley and Empson, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). The visibility of class-based inequality can therefore depend on one’s position.

Bourdieu’s field concept also shows how some forms of class-based inequality may be less recognisable in everyday contexts. The logic of a field legitimates hierarchies, with certain positions valorised over others. Hierarchies between positions are often taken-for-granted or unremarked upon as a form of class-based inequality (Bottero, 2004). However, Bourdieu (1993) argues that the valorisation of certain positions is not neutral but is socially structured. Hierarchies are formed from historic struggles within and between fields, in which those with the most valued capital not only ‘win’ the game but can name the capital valued. Certain positions acquire greater symbolic capital than others (e.g. commissioning TV programmes rather than marketing them (Friedman and Laurison, 2019)), and become associated with forms of cultural capital and habitus (e.g. a studied informality in meetings). However, these positional hierarchies are often not scrutinised in everyday contexts (Bottero, 2004; Sayer, 2011).

Here, misrecognition is a critical concept (Bourdieu, 1987, 1989). This describes the process by which the privileged possession of capital by an individual or institution is misrecognised as neutral and hence their superior position is legitimated. Misrecognition is a two-way process. It relies on the ability of those in dominant positions to ‘world-make’, constructing their view of the world as natural and neutral (Bourdieu, 1987: 13). It also requires acceptance of this ‘world-making’ by ‘dominated’ groups. Bourdieu proposes two views of how misrecognition happens (Burawoy, 2019). A ‘thick’ version argues that those in dominated positions in society do not question social arrangements, but uncritically accept them through a process of pre-conscious socialisation. Bottero (2020) argues that this limits an individual’s agency and has limited explanatory power. A thinner version of ‘misrecognition’ takes into account that people recognise unequal social arrangements yet are still persuaded that ‘playing the game’ is worthwhile, seeing these as external constraints to be negotiated (Bourdieu, 1989; Burawoy, 2019).

This latter version highlights the need to empirically investigate how people construct the game they are playing, their occupational field, alongside how they construct class-based inequality. This is a research gap for which Bourdieu’s conceptual framework provides a valuable lens. Seeing field as a dynamic site, having a stake in the game may make inequality between players more visible. The classed nature of the field, however, may be less visible since the logic and dynamics of the game may facilitate a form of misrecognition.

The Field of UK Museum Work

We investigate how class-based inequality is constructed by those with a stake in UK museum work. Museums are a significant case since they construct knowledge and identities on behalf of society (Macdonald, 2011). How class-based inequalities are constructed within the field has implications beyond the sector. Bourdieu himself had a particular interest in the museum field. He demonstrates how museum-visiting is implicated in the construction of classed forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989), a finding replicated in more recent studies (Bennett et al., 2009). However, the role this

capital plays in ‘classing’ the museum workforce has received little examination, a significant omission given it is a potentially unlevel field, shaped by hierarchies between institutions and job roles (Evans, 2020; Evans et al., 2021).

Bourdieu’s conceptual framework enables us to analyse how certain dimensions of class-based inequality might be visible to those UK museum workers ‘playing the game’. It has been used to show how cultural careers within the UK favour people with certain types of economic, social and cultural capital. Working in fields such as acting or TV requires capital to live in London, build networks, demonstrate flexibility and be at ease with required forms of cultural knowledge (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). When framed by the demands of their career, this form of ‘between-individual’ class-based inequality is highly visible to research participants who lack this capital but less visible to those in senior positions. Research into class-based inequality within the UK museum sector is limited though what is available suggests inequalities ‘between individuals’ may be visible. Evans et al. (2021) show how the museum career can be excluding for those with low amounts of economic capital, requiring costly qualifications and work at low or no pay. Indeed, data show that 59% of museum workers hold a postgraduate qualification (BOP Consulting, 2016), while a recent report indicates that only 5.2% of curators have parents from a working-class background, compared with 23% of the UK population (McAndrew et al., 2024).

Bourdieu’s framework also enables us to examine how structural forms of class-based inequality may be obscured by the logic of the museum field. Bourdieu (1989, 1993) argues that museums are characterised by a pre-capitalist logic that disavows the market, replacing churches as consecrators of objects and collections. Museums are thus a field ‘reversed’, driven by an historic logic of *keeping collections special* (Grenfell and Hardy, 2007), of pursuing symbolic capital (making a name for an institution, object or artist), while disavowing immediate economic profit. This silencing of the role of economic capital potentially leads to a misrecognition of its role in reinforcing inequalities between institutional and occupational positions.

In the UK, museums are defined by their funding arrangements (e.g. national government, local university or independent). There are estimated to be 2500 museums and 52,000 museum workers (DCMS, 2023). In recent years, political and epistemological shifts have diversified museum work, from scholar-curator roles focused on collections, to roles based on income-generation, fundraising, marketing, and education and meeting audience/societal needs (McCall and Gray, 2014). Despite this, hierarchies in the field are primarily shaped by the logic of *keeping collections special*. Collections-based roles are constructed as ‘core’, while those connected to market or audience are positioned lower down (Evans, 2020; Evans et al., 2021).

The museum field is thus a hierarchised and potentially unequal site with differential access to certain roles. This presents a significant case in which to examine everyday constructions of class-based inequality, specifically: *How do those with a stake in UK museum work construct class-based inequality in relation to their field?*

Methodology

The study takes a social constructionist approach, holding that knowledge is constructed through social interaction, and is shaped by context and power relations. Discourse is

important, both in constituting and investigating social reality. Our approach builds on Fairclough's (1992) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in which attention is paid to both language and the context of its use, combined with Bourdieu's (1987, 1989) conceptual framework. This provides a lens to critically examine different constructions of class-based inequality alongside, and in relation to, the discursive logic and dynamics of the museum field. We draw on primary and secondary data collected in two phases between March 2017 and August 2018.

Phase one involved scoping the field. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a purposive sample (Saunders and Townsend, 2018) of 10 organisations that claimed to 'represent' the field (professional associations, trade unions, membership bodies, funders and universities). Participants were not recruited to represent a particular class background, but rather for their knowledge of how class had been addressed within the field, including policy officers, CEOs and sector development workers. They were asked about class-based inequality, current challenges for museums and their workers, and to identify relevant secondary material in the field in the public domain. These participants constructed the museum field as a particularly hierarchised site, remarking on the difficulty of 'knowing' class-based inequality as an abstract construct.

Phase two built on phase one, examining how UK museum workers constructed their field, hierarchies, career, class and class-based inequality. Participants could choose between interview (face-to-face, Skype, telephone or email) or focus group. The first author created a website and used social media and contacts from phase one to recruit participants.

The research was open to anyone who (had) worked or volunteered in UK museums. We did not recruit for any demographic characteristics including class as we did not want to impose our own constructed categories. Our inductive approach involved inviting people to participate if they thought class had affected them or the sector in general. Participants (56 interview and 63 focus group) comprised various occupational roles, for example, curators, museum directors, educators, fundraisers, contractors, administrators, ex-employees, front-of-house staff and volunteers, from museums across the UK and all participants were asked: What is class, what is your class and how do you know? This prompted participant reflections on the difficulty of knowing class, most using a range of proxies to determine their own class background (such as parents' occupation, housing, income, education). The majority in phase two described their background as 'working class' though not all.

Interviews provided a personal space for participants to reflect on their work, career, what class meant to them, hierarchies in the field and thoughts on class-based inequality in museum work. Each interview mode produced different experiences. Phone interviews offered the opportunity to balance rapport while giving participants somewhere to hide! Face-to-face and Skype required more 'work' to set up and manage rapport and deal with the 'unsaid' power dynamics of the interview situation (Cassell, 2005). Skype also required managing the technology, something not all participants could do in pre-COVID-19 times. Email interviews gave participants the opportunity to write answers in their own time, though with less opportunity for the interviewer to prompt or create rapport.

Focus groups explored shared and contested constructions of class-based inequality and the museum field. Nine focus groups were held in Birmingham, Bristol, London,

Leeds, Manchester and Wales. Focus group participants comprised a mix of different occupational roles. They were asked to reflect on how they understood class, the structure of the field (including a group exercise in which they reconstructed institutional and occupational hierarchies using post-it notes on a flipchart) and their experiences of getting in, and on, within museums.

Guidelines for ethical practice in human research were followed (British Psychological Society, 2021). University approval was given by the appropriate Ethics Officer, informed consent was obtained from all participants including agreement to be recorded and data were anonymised. While all secondary data were in the public domain, the ethical considerations of Internet research (Whiting and Pritchard, 2017) apply. Therefore, all quotes used here have individual-level identifying material removed.

Our data were analysed iteratively in phases. We used Fairclough's (1992) three-stage model of CDA, which necessitates close and thorough attention to language, the context of its use and then a level of interpretation, which we did using Bourdieu's (1989, 1993) conceptual framework. Initially, a small amount of data was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of language and its context. For example, we analysed a report on museums, *The Mendoza Review* (Mendoza, 2017), which constructed a distinction between national and other museums, linguistically and through presentation (the former had their own section). We identified how the language of 'collections' was used to justify these hierarchical classifications and the symbolic power invested in this. Discursive themes were then developed and tested on larger amounts of data. From this we noted when certain types of class-based inequality were more remarked on than others; for example, inequality between individuals in contrast to inequality between positions. We found these constructions of class-based inequality were variously shaped by participants' position and the logic and dynamics of the field in which they had a stake. We developed our analysis iteratively through processes of writing, discussion and presentation and identified three versions of class-based inequality, which we present below.

Findings

Those with a stake in UK museum work constructed three versions of class-based inequality variously shaped by the museum field: (1) between individuals: bringing inequality to light; (2) between positions: legitimating logic of the field; and (3) between institution and worker: the dynamics of the game. We unpack each below, with illustrative data examples. For each, we describe how the problem of class-based inequality is constructed and how the structure and dynamics of the field directs attention to, or away from, these constructions.

Between Individuals: Bringing Inequality to Light

This version of class-based inequality is constructed as a problem 'between individuals', where some have more of the 'right' sort of capital – economic, social and cultural – than others. The inequality of this stems from it being an inherited or acquired capital, bought into the museum field, which meant some people could 'play the game' better than others. The outcome is a monopoly of certain positions by certain types of

people: 'Museum Boards seem to be composed of the famous, titled, and rich. The voice of the working man is rarely in the board room' (Heritage Researcher, Interviewee). The focus of this construction is on the individual rather than the field itself. Class is constructed as a property of a person, their background and embodied ways of being, locating the inequality beyond the field, a societal problem of some people having more capital than others.

The museum field however plays an important role in directing attention to this construction. As an abstract concept, class-based inequality is seen by participants as difficult to 'know'. However, when discussed in relation to the museum field, participants more easily locate this dimension of class-based inequality, using it to explain who progressed in the field. This dimension is thus made manifest in relation to a shared construction of the museum field, its hierarchies, the positions valued and capital required. It is particularly prevalent when participants construct their own career narrative or speculated on the careers of others:

I feel I've held myself back by not being from a privileged background. My family, as delighted as they were that I'd got into the Courtauld from a relatively modest university, I couldn't afford to go. I've always felt it's affected my career. (Curatorial Assistant, Focus group Leeds)

In terms of class, we talked about networking earlier. I don't think you can really get to Director position without a network and knowing the right circles. (Marketing Officer, Focus group London)

These two speakers describe economic and social capital and its role in getting on within museum work. The first explains how a lack of economic capital meant they could not acquire valued cultural capital in the museum field (a qualification from a high-status institution). The inequality they describe is rooted in their personal circumstances ('I couldn't afford to go'), visible when they bump up against the museum field, but a problem emanating from beyond it. The second speaker speculates on the need to have social capital ('network' 'knowing the right circles') to acquire roles beyond the reach of many ('Director position'). This again locates the root of class-based inequality as beyond the museum field, where some individuals have already accumulated capital they can utilise.

This construction of class-based inequality is also used in relation to personal encounters, a personalised testimony of 'classism'. Participants share stories of being made to feel inferior by certain colleagues in the field, a de-valuation of their embodied cultural capital:

It's hard to constantly go to work when people dismiss your experience and intelligence because [I] don't dress and talk a certain way. (Museum Operations Manager, Interviewee)

I often have to dial back my regional accent to [. . .] appear 'professional' and [. . .] compete with others who have worked in more exclusive institutions. I feel [. . .] I have to prove myself. (Museum Registrar, Interviewee)

This class-based inequality is described at a more affective level, an injury to self where the individual feels their abilities are misinterpreted because they have the 'wrong' type

of cultural capital – accent or dress. It makes their work in the field difficult on an enduring basis ('It's hard to constantly go to work'; 'I have to prove myself'), and conceivably harder than for those who make them feel inferior. These constructions suggest there is a form of embodied cultural capital that has become dominant within museum work.

This construction of inequality as 'between individuals' positions the museum field as an unlevel playing field. Inequality is located within the experience of playing a game in which some people have more economic, social and cultural capital than others. However, while it is critical of the 'game' as non-meritocratic, it is not critical of the structure of the field itself. It maintains and indeed reinforces hierarchies that construct certain types of institutional and occupational position as more desirable than others.

Between Positions: Legitimizing Logic of the Field

This version of class-based inequality focuses on the positions in the field rather than the individuals within them. Participants construct inequality as both the unfair access to capital enjoyed by some institutional and occupational positions, as well as greater power to influence the sector. For example, national museums are constructed as enjoying access to funding on a scale unavailable to other museums, as well as a mandate to lead the sector. Similarly, curatorial roles are constructed as having greater status and influence than other roles. This version is less remarked on than the 'between-individuals' version and not always aligned with class. Nonetheless, it arises from processes of classification, in which certain institutions and roles are classed as naturally 'superior'.

The field plays a significant role in directing attention towards this construction of class-based inequality. It is the positions in the field that are classed. And it is the view from certain positions that provides sight of this construction. Participants in 'non-dominant' positions, lower down or peripheral to the hierarchy, are more likely to complain about the unfair distribution of capital between positions in the field. This is most explicit when commenting on institutional hierarchies:

National museum at the top? They're not the best museums, right. It's just because they're national. . . they've got government backing, government funding, they must be the best museums, employing the best? (Curator, Focus group Bristol)

I was at an event and the British Museum were talking about everything we were doing. But we haven't got £300,000 and we don't have the BM rubber stamp on the projects. It feels like our work is less valid. (Curator, Focus group Wales)

The first speaker, from a local authority museum, challenges the national name as a taken-for-granted assumption of quality. They argue that their symbolic capital was largely premised on political support and economic capital ('government backing', 'government funding'), calling out how this misdirects everyone's attention ('they must be the best. . .?'). The second speaker, from a small community museum, challenges how the work of a national museum is seen as superior to their own ('feels like our work is less valid'). They highlight how unfair access to economic (£300,000) and symbolic ('BM rubber stamp') capital works simultaneously to construct and conceal this class-based inequality.

Participants also challenge the inequality between occupational positions though more rarely than criticising institutional hierarchies. Again, it often comes from participants in a peripheral position within the hierarchy. Participants do not necessarily critique the work of a curator but rather their privileged access to collections and status, as illustrated below:

[Class prejudice] is often hidden behind the preciousness of the object. I was working with the community, and we wanted to use [name of particular object]. We were not allowed to, it was too precious, but [named curator on TV], they brought it out for her. (Researcher, Focus group London)

Students think if they are front of house, they can be a curator, automatically. They said, it's only a stepping-stone. I hated that, I thought you don't know the job that I do, don't you dream of knocking it. (Porter, Focus group Manchester)

Both of these speakers occupied non-curatorial positions. The first speaker, a freelance researcher, constructs their lack of access to collections as a form of class prejudice. They compare their position as a facilitator of a community project with that of a TV curator, who enjoyed access to the collections they do not. The second, a museum porter, presents a deeper challenge to the hierarchies themselves, arguing that the symbolic capital attached to the role of curator in effect diminishes the value of their work as a porter. Their work is rendered unseen ('you don't know the job that I do') and not intrinsically valuable ('a stepping-stone').

However, class-based inequality 'between positions' is more difficult to see than that 'between individuals'. Indeed, the differential distribution of capital between positions is often constructed as entirely justified. The discursive logic of the field, that of *keeping collections special*, is often deployed to legitimise how such hierarchies are constructed. National museums, for example, are frequently positioned at the top of institutional hierarchies justified by the status of the collections they care for: 'These [. . .] are known as national museums because their highly valuable collections of world-class significance are looked after on behalf of the nation' (Mendoza, 2017: 14. Secondary Data). In this Review, national museums are constructed as 'national' because of the ostensible value of their collection ('highly valuable', 'world-class'). The field logic of *keeping collections special* then legitimates a level of distinction and access to capital (central government funding, political support, a mandate to 'lead' the sector) denied to other museums. This logic is commonly applied by participants:

Res: Explain to me, why would a national museum be at the top?

Participant: Because they have the best collections, the best funding, the best people. (Researcher and Museum Officer, Focus group London)

In this extract, the participant uses the field logic ('best collections') combined with possession of other forms of economic capital ('best funding', 'best people') to justify national museums' top position. These examples illustrate how the logic and language of the field can 'misdirect' attention from inequality. The possession of the 'best' or

'world-class' collections are not constructed as a form of economic wealth, which has been accumulated, but a form of meritocratic distinction warranting further investment.

Similarly, the logic of *keeping collections special* also legitimates occupational hierarchies. Positions associated with developing knowledge around collections are valorised above all other roles. These are the roles that had greatest status and influence in the field, despite not being well paid:

There's always been a divide between those on the lower grades, often less educated, and obviously on poor salaries and the curator grade staff, which also on not great salaries, for what they do! But they are university educated, they've got the knowledge and are seen as the ones who are the museums. (Museum Administrator, Interviewee)

This speaker constructs a 'them and us' distinction between curator roles and all other staff. The curator role is constructed as able to *keep collections special* by conferring particular ways of knowing ('university educated', 'they've got the knowledge') in a way that other grades were not ('often less educated'). Indeed, the ostensible ability of curators to *keep collections special* also helps keep the whole field special ('seen as the ones who are the museums'). It invokes a taken-for-granted stance that curatorial knowledge is superior to other roles.

The logic of the field and one's position within it thus plays a role in 'directing' attention to this version of class-based inequality. The differing possession of capital between positions might be constructed as unequal depending on one's position in the field. It might also be constructed as a legitimate form of distinction. The logic of the field, and the language of collections 'misdirect' attention from this as a form of class-based inequality.

Between Institution and Worker: The Dynamics of the Game

This version of class-based inequality describes an unequal relationship between museums as institutions and individual workers. Institutions, particularly national museums, are constructed as frequently capitalising on their symbolic capital, by paying individual workers low or no pay and expecting more in return. While not always described using the language of class, it is nonetheless a construction of unequal power relations between two groups along Marxian lines. On one side are those representing employers (the museums) and on the other, museum workers.

While this version is a prominent complaint, it is also tempered by the logic and dynamics of the field. *Keeping collections special* means that institutional needs are sometimes privileged over those of individual museum workers particularly in a challenging funding climate. The logic of the field also shapes the dynamics of the 'game'. Hence, while participants complain of the unfair treatment of museum workers, they are nonetheless caught in a game, where pursuit of a particular type of symbolic capital matters. It is through playing the game that these unequal dynamics between institution and individual museum worker persist. It is not so much misrecognition of class-based inequality, therefore, but a pragmatic response to the condition of playing.

This version of class-based inequality is prevalent when participants talk about the difficulty of pursuing a museum career. Participants were asked specifically about barriers to

working in museums and frequently cited low or no pay. These discussions led to the observation that some institutions were particularly bad payers:

A friend of mine has just taken a job at Tate Britain with a massive cut in salary, just because she wanted to work for the Tate. (Curator, Focus group Bristol)

There's been a lot of debate on Twitter about the V&A's job postings. They've been called out on the fact that their internship is actually a job. You're expected to have a postgraduate degree, but they're not going to pay you to do it. (Curator, Focus group London)

These extracts illustrate how national museums are criticised as particularly exploitative. The first extract illustrates how this is premised on the symbolic capital attached to working for a national institution, sacrificing economic capital ('massive cut in salary') in order to acquire symbolic ('to work for the Tate'). Similarly, a national museum had not only advertised an internship that offered no economic capital ('not going to pay you'), it had also requested a prior investment in a postgraduate qualification, the inequality of which was recognised on social media.

Complaints of this inequality depended on position in the employment relationship. Participants in managerial positions with responsibility for recruitment and budgets often frame their responsibility in the context of a competitive funding market, having to make difficult decisions between institutional needs and those of the museum workers:

If we've only ten quid I'm going to have to go with the person that's got the master's and PhD, not the person that just really wants to work in a museum and I think that's a reasonable business decision because we're having to operate as businesses. (Museum Development Officer, Interviewee)

I've got a member of staff at the moment who I'm desperate to give a salary raise to, [. . .]. But there is no way that can easily happen. I think it's incredibly hard not to exploit people. [. . .] We've got a storeroom that's got mould in it, so I have to deal with that. (Museum Manager, Interviewee)

These speakers construct the employment relationship as shaped by a difficult funding environment. The first speaker invoked a market discourse in which museums must 'operate as businesses'. Recruitment is constructed as a pragmatic question of making a 'reasonable business decision', privileging 'business' needs over those of museum workers. The second speaker uses the language of exploitation, constructing this as an unintentional outcome of balancing staff needs against the funding needs of the collection. In this climate, the institutional needs of being able to *keep collections special* are prioritised over those of the worker.

The dynamics of the museum field also means that while participants complain of this inequality, they nonetheless pursue their career according to the logic on which it is based. Hence, while aware of potentially poorer employment conditions many participants still aspire to gain the symbolic capital of working for a national museum. Indeed, for many it is constructed as a career pinnacle:

I was desperately jealous of a friend of mine who got an internship at Tate Britain working on a Pre-Raphaelite exhibition. (Curator, Focus group London)

It's difficult for me to progress to a national museum because I don't have a background in art history, and I come from the regions. (Regional Museum Director, Interviewee)

The National Gallery is a great brand, and you were very proud to say you work there. (Digital Officer, Focus group London)

These extracts describe working for a national museum as a valued source of symbolic capital at various career stages. The first speaker constructs it as a career marker in early career, a source of jealousy that a friend had got 'in'; the second as a naturalised progression from where they were, albeit unlikely for them; while the third reflects on working for a national museum as a source of pride. These extracts thus illustrate how museum workers are willing players, despite the potential economic costs. By playing the game, they in effect reinforce the rules of playing.

The logic and dynamics of the field thus render complaints about this form of class-based inequality less potent. The logic of the field, *keeping collections special*, is used to justify pragmatic decisions that favoured the institution over museum workers. Field dynamics also mean that many museum workers accept the pursuit of symbolic capital over economic. We argue this is a form of 'pragmatic acceptance' of the terms of the game, rather than a misrecognition of inequality. What may be less 'recognised' is the effect that playing the game has in reinforcing the power of the symbolic capital invested in institutions.

Discussion

This study examines how those with a stake in UK museum work construct class-based inequality in relation to their field. It presents three constructions of class-based inequality variously shaped by the logic and dynamics of the field. The first constructs an inequality of capital between individuals, in which the field provides a familiar, hierarchised space against which this inequality is brought to light. The second, an inequality of capital between hierarchised positions, is rendered less remarkable and indeed legitimised by the logic of the field, *keeping collections special*, and mostly deployed by participants in non-dominant positions. The third, inequality of capital between institution and worker, is 'recognised' but also pragmatically accepted as part of the field logic and dynamics.

Our study makes three contributions to knowledge and understanding of how context shapes everyday constructions of inequality. First, our study makes an empirical contribution to delineating different dimensions of class-based inequality constructed in everyday contexts. Analysis of everyday constructions has previously focused on class-based inequality as a singular phenomenon between individuals. We show how class-based inequality is applied to multiple relational dimensions within an occupational context. This helps move beyond debates over what is class – economic or cultural (Crompton, 2008) – to focusing on the relations that are classed instead – between individuals, between positions or between institution and worker. These three versions provide a useful heuristic for researchers to further investigate how some versions of class-based inequality are more visible than others and examine why. They are also an important first step for practitioners to critically reflect upon

common-sense assumptions, such as distributive or contributive inequalities between positions (Sayer, 2011) and tackle class-based inequalities at a structural level.

Second, we provide empirical evidence of how constructions of class-based inequality are situated within, and shaped by, an occupational context. This shows the value of Bourdieu's (1987, 1993) concept of field in viewing occupational context not as a neutral backdrop, but as a dynamic site with its own logic and game-playing, which can highlight, obscure or legitimise class-based inequalities. This extends the work of Andersen et al. (2021), showing how meso-level contexts function. The museum field brings inequality between individuals into sharp relief. This inequality is upheld by a shared construction of the field, the rules of the game, as well as experience of 'playing'. The museum field also generates a logic, *keeping collections special*, which obscures and sometimes legitimates inequality: between positions and between institution and worker. Furthermore, the dynamics of the field, the pursuit of valued capital, means that museum workers are not just neutral observers of their context, but also active participants in its reproduction.

Third, and relatedly, we contribute a nuanced empirical understanding of the 'misrecognition' of inequality. As with Andersen et al. (2021) and Irwin (2018), our participants were sophisticated observers of various forms of class-based inequality. The most 'recognised' version was that between individuals. The less 'recognised' version was that between positions, obscured behind the taken-for-granted hierarchies of the field and legitimated by field logic. We argue this is more 'misdirection' than misrecognition, difficult to see when participants are not looking for it. It was mostly visible to participants in non-dominant or peripheral positions, who were able to reflect critically on how field hierarchies are constructed and justified. Participants are also critical observers of inequality between institution and museum worker, and yet still willing to play the game, a form of pragmatic acceptance of its terms. What is less visible perhaps is the collective effect of these processes whereby existing social arrangements are reinforced because everyone wants to benefit from the symbolic capital they confer. Our empirical findings thus support the conclusion of Bottero (2020) and Burawoy (2019) that any 'misrecognition' of class-based equality is a thinner version, located in the dynamics of the game rather than the thicker version, a pre-conscious process of socialisation.

Our focus here is on constructions at the meso level of field, specifically that of UK museum work. As a cultural occupation where the ordinary logic of the market is reversed (Bourdieu, 1993; Grenfell and Hardy, 2007), this provides a pertinent case in which to examine how context shapes understandings of class-based inequality. Our research addresses a gap, examining the under-researched UK museum sector, and directs attention to class-based inequality as a structural feature of context, not just a feature of individuals within that context. Demonstrating how class-based inequality is seen and not seen within an everyday context such as UK museum work, is an important precondition to, and practical resource for, addressing such inequalities. Future research can extend this by looking at alternative occupations, examining more closely the relationship between macro, meso and micro level as outlined by Andersen et al. (2021) and examining how people view structural inequality from different positions within an occupational or organisational context.

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