Stories of family in working-class graduates' early careers

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How do young graduates view the role of immediate families in influencing/supporting them as they start their working lives and how do those reflections affect how they think of themselves as graduates? Social, political and economic changes have led to many young people being dependent on family for longer, but how does this play out in their reflections? This article addresses these questions by reporting upon findings from qualitative research with 14 young people from working-class backgrounds, who were part of a larger study of recent graduates. Figured Worlds theory illuminates data, with a consideration of the role that family plays in the 'space of authoring' and understanding of 'positionality'. Findings capture vivid stories of the enabling but also limiting role of family. In our analysis of data, we borrow the words 'salience' from Holland and her co-authors and 'distinction' from Bourdieu, which help capture different depictions of family. Both articulations of 'salience' and a search for 'distinction' emerge in how graduates' stories respond to family. We argue for a greater appreciation of the differing family resources of working-class graduates, and reject an emphasis on what they may lack, compared to their peers, which has tended to be the case in some media and policy commentary. There are implications for educators to foster student reflexivity about family sensitively, and to be aware of how family backgrounds may influence graduate career paths and students' awareness of wider inequalities.

Introduction

Our attention on family in this article is the English context, in which patterns and expectations around young graduates' relationships with family contrast with many other parts of the globe (including many countries in both the Global North and South) (Finn and Holton, 2019). Historically, in the UK, there have been assumptions about the ideal graduate as one who can be rapidly independent of family. However, dependency upon family for young people in the UK has increased at a time when many rites of passage to adulthood are delayed due to social and economic conditions. Geographers have illustrated that mobility patterns suggest a greater intergenerational interdependence and the concept of boomeranging has emerged (Sage *et al.*, 2013), as young people move out and move back into family homes. In popular and journalistic writing there has been growing attention on the impact of generational differences in society, with fears that young people today face multiple challenges, including a less structured labour market, higher housing costs and greater debt for those who stay in education (Major and Machin, 2018). This has also

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extended into policy-oriented literature, notably in the work of the Resolution Foundation (Clarke, 2018b), and there has also been increasing concern about what this means for young people starting out in life, who may not have family emotional and financial resources to draw upon as a safety net (Bland and Stevenson, 2018). Public debates about generations are often framed around crude presentations of generation theory, a 'them and us', 'baby boomers and millennials' dichotomy which fosters age as the greatest example of social inequity, ignoring other inequalities and the interconnectedness of generations. It is in this context that this article seeks to reveal how graduates reflect upon their relationships with family. The findings reported upon are from a larger study about early graduate careers, based on one university in the North of England. Graduates of Arts, Creative Arts and Humanities, as well as Business and Law, were the population targeted. Priority in this article is a consideration of graduates from working-class backgrounds and to illuminate ordinary lives rather than the unusual or exceptional, which is the focus of studies about elite graduates or those who are estranged from family.

The argument developed in this article contributes to existing work that has problematised normative ideas about graduate employability; in so doing, it adds to processual and relational theorising about graduate identity. Holmes (2013) has been a leading proponent of an exploration of graduate employability that goes beyond the possessive and positional, and can reflect more nuanced processual issues. Finn (2016a) has argued for a more explicit recognition of the relational significance of both kin and non-kin in employment transitions. She has used a proximate and elastic typology, and considered how this affects graduates' ability to hold on or change course in relation to their career. We add to this body of work, creating our own thematic categories, which we summarise using the words 'salience' and 'distinction', both of which we borrow from theory that influences our approach. We argue that binary depictions of 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' fail to appreciate the diversity of social support and social capital that is present. The 'advantaged'/'disadvantaged' binary emerges in much government commentary (e.g. Social Mobility Commission, 2019), that correctly recognises inequalities in the labour market and tends to lead towards policy and practice orientations which highlight how working-class graduates may be in deficit with regard to certain family resources, a depiction that is echoed in media commentary (e.g. BBC, 2019).

A new application of the theoretical work of Dorothy Holland and her co-authors underpins arguments made and adds to recent work which has utilised this theory in this domain (Christie, 2019). Analytically, the study draws upon their sociocultural theory of Figured Worlds[1] (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) and specifically the constructs of 'space of authoring' and 'positionality' (pp. 271–272) to consider how individuals position and present themselves. Holland *et al.* (1998, p. 127) examine what 'stories, acts, and characters' populate the 'cultural world(s)' that people inhabit and argue against the myth of what they call 'freewheeling' individualism. Predominantly, they draw upon Bakhtinian, Bourdieusian and Vygotskian ideas to argue for a social perspective on identity that frames it as a dialogical performance of multiple selves, continually developed through social engagement. In so doing, their core object is 'identity in practice', and they conceptualise identity as a form of social learning that 'combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of

cultural forms and social relations' (p. 5). Arguably, the 'intimate' world of family, which this article seeks to explore, has implications for how graduates make meaning of turbulent and uncertain contexts. Fundamentally, Figured Worlds as a theory contributes to debates about how individual agency develops in a way that does not ignore structural influences.

Social inequalities in the graduate labour market

In the UK, graduates and their families look to universities to provide a launchpad to future career success (Harrison and Waller, 2018). There is increasing pressure for universities to be seen to deliver positive graduate outcomes in rapid and monetised ways, which ignores labour market research which suggests that it can take longer to settle into a career (Purcell *et al.*, 2013), as well as backgrounding the more subjective benefits gained by having a degree (Green and Henseke, 2016). Fears about graduate underemployment, precarious labour markets and the slowdown of social mobility underscore much debate (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2019), with divided opinions on what can be done in order to improve graduate prospects. Considerations of the role of family and associated networks, and the social capital this confers, have emerged as pivotal in facilitating eventual graduate employment. The concept of social capital originates from the work of Bourdieu, which Burke and Hannaford-Simpson (2019) argue has become both ubiquitous and increasingly detached from the original concept, and has been widely applied to describe how networks and connections are used to informally reproduce social inequalities in graduate employment research. This can result from access to useful contacts, sought-after internships as well as financial resources. The more neutral term 'social support' has been used elsewhere as distinct from social capital, more prosaically recognising the support that moderates abilities to secure meaningful work (Duffy *et al.*, 2016).

There are divided policy opinions about what can be done about inequalities, which are associated with market liberalism, and they appear to be strengthening. Despite enduring consensus that inequalities prevail, the notion of the competitive individual career actor (disconnected from their context) dominates in much popular writing about careers (Vallas and Hill, 2018). Tactics to get ahead are foregrounded as an increasing number of graduates compete for fewer structured opportunities in a more flexible labour market. The meritocratic ideal underscores assumptions that competition for jobs is fair and natural, with individuals acting as rational career actors. Arguably, the 'neoliberal social imaginary' leads individuals to believe that success is all about personal hard work and determination, which research with school students and their parents/carers has shown (Mendick *et al.*, 2015; Snee and Devine, 2018, p. 1135).

While there have been increases in non-traditional students going to university (Harrison, 2017), classed patterns remain in terms of where students apply and the recruitment practices of universities, in particular elite universities (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016; Boliver, 2017). Throughout the student lifecycle, the impact of class has been illustrated in terms of student experience (Reay *et al.*, 2010) and the disconnection that can occur between working-class students, often first-generation university students, and their families and previous peer groups (Ingram and Abrahams, 2015;

Morrin, 2015). In particular, Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been a central concept in accounting for these experiences, as working-class students' norms and dispositions are at times incongruent to the expectations within higher education. Lehmann (2009) developed the concept of 'moral capital' in arguing that working-class students capitalise on their backgrounds in assertions about the hard work that they had to embrace in order to get on, which can lead them to disassociate from their backgrounds as they become educated and claim 'middle classness'. In contrast, Loveday (2015) argues that successful working-class graduates can demonstrate class consciousness as they continue to be proud of their roots. Notably, a Bourdieusian analysis highlights the transfer of habitus from parents to children, and tends to ignore significant aspects of family, such as 'sibship' (Davies, 2015).

Rather than higher education being the 'great equaliser' and answering the meritocratic promise made to students upon entering university, experiences of the graduate labour market are heavily classed, and also intersected by race and gender. Previously, research has outlined the impact of class on how graduates navigate both the broader graduate labour market (Burke, 2015) and elite graduate occupations (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). In particular, research has illustrated the role of capitals beyond scholastic in allowing or reducing opportunities to enter this field, and graduates' ability to demonstrate a sense of (habitus) fit in an organisation. This sense of fit is coupled with the recruitment practices of top graduate recruiters, requiring a mirroring of applications to organisational culture far beyond credentials and expertise (Ingram and Allen, 2018). This critique is further reinforced through research demonstrating the role of self-regulation, directing what working-class graduates expect for themselves in the labour market, including lower wages and reduced employment opportunities (e.g. Furlong and Cartmel, 2005).

Other writing from the sociology of education has explored the role of family ties in influencing graduates' perceptions of who they want to become, and issues of social and geographic mobility intertwine with hope for careers. Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) have reported on trends which indicate that working-class students are more likely to stay at home for university, which then risks leading to fewer career opportunities. Finn (2016a,b, 2017) argues against assumptions about mobility being the only marker of career ambition, as she presents cases of graduates who want a meaningful career but also want to stay close to home. She has developed a typology of differing relationalities (Finn, 2016a) which can be summarised as 'proximate' (which denotes 'interpersonal practices and values that are characterised by physical closeness, informality, and traditionally working-class and gendered ideas about care and support'); and 'elastic' (which 'signify feelings of embeddedness in more diverse and geographically dispersed networks of kin and non-kin intimacies'). She implies that the former is more common amongst working-class people, with elasticity more prevalent amongst those with family resources that allow them to be more geographically mobile. The challenge is raised of respecting the choices individuals make to stay close to family, while recognising that those who are more mobile geographically appear to secure labour market advantage.

Meanwhile, there has been a widening of the debate in the graduate employability literature more broadly, which has moved away from an emphasis on individual employability to a recognition of the range of contextual issues that impact upon career

prospects (Tomlinson and Holmes, 2016; Clarke, 2018a). There has also been a valuable turn to consider issues of identity development (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2013). Holmes has argued for more attention to be given to processual issues of identity, critiquing those who (in his view) give too much emphasis to 'positional' or 'possessive' concerns in discussions of employability, which includes a departure from Bourdieusian social theory. Tomlinson has built on the sociological language of capitals (Tomlinson, 2017), and departed from the established model of Bourdieu, to describe how graduates develop with implications for how capitals can be facilitated (e.g. how universities can foster their students' social networks and capital).

This article adds to a growing body of work that gives more attention to theorising about graduate employment and employability, considering relational and processual debates about graduate identity and the importance of family. The data discussed here arose as part of a study in which issues of family unexpectedly emerged as being of great interest. Graduates from working-class backgrounds are discussed as the research uncovered rich back stories which lead us to argue against notions of deficit, as implied both by mainstream politicians who decry a lack of aspiration and scholars who argue for the enduring nature of habitus. It is important to stress that our findings emerge from the particularities of the English context, with its specific challenges around inequalities. However, we believe that our conclusions will have relevance to many other advanced market-liberal nations, who are also experiencing growing inequalities. Figured Worlds theory was adopted as a way to explore these issues due to its ability to explain dynamic individual subjectivities that surround agency development, while not ignoring the role of structural factors.

Figuring out families

In this article, we adopt Holland *et al.*'s (1998) Figured Worlds theory in order to explore the individual subjectivities that are associated with the development of agency. We purposefully depart from the use of a classic Bourdieusian theoretical lens in doing so. 'Identity in practice' is Holland and co-workers' core object in their work, and they define this as:

> We take identity to be a central means by which selves, and the sets of actions they organise, form and re-form over personal lifetimes and in the histories of social collectivities... Identity is one way of naming the dense interconnections between the intimate and public venues of social practice... Practiced identities are constructs that can be referenced to several contexts of activity. (pp. 270–271)

Figured Worlds has four main constructs, which we will go on to explain. An understanding of these constructs (each of which includes additional thinking tools) is pivotal in considering what improvisation an individual may make:
- figured worlds (the field populated with embodied and symbolic figures, and cultural models);
- positionality (the position held in a field linked to power, status and rank);
- space of authoring (the resources available to author self and narratives utilised);
- world making (the imagining of a different social positioning and structure, through the orchestration of existing cultural resources/voices).

Holland *et al.* (1998), in their Figured Worlds theory, synthesise ideas from a range of twentieth-century thinkers. From Bourdieu, they reshape notions of habitus into what is called 'history-in-person'. They also draw on ideas of the field, called 'figured worlds' (p. 41), where a set of structured practices and objective relations exist and position people, which Holland and co-workers depict figuratively as well as materially. They invoke Bourdieu's (1977) depiction of agency, which involves strategic improvisation within the limited choices that are available within a field. From Vygotsky (1978) and Leont'ev (1978), a focus on semiotic mediation in activity is adopted, and the conception of a self that develops within a 'zone of proximal development' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 272). The 'figured worlds' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 41) share this focus on the symbolic. Cultural models, tools and signs are observed, which are framed linguistically and can enter the psyche and become incorporated into one's 'history-in-person' (p. 65). Such signs or symbols may include specific words, metaphors or phrases, but also emblematic 'narratives' (p. 53). They describe such signs as 'identity tools' (p. 41). We argue, for example, that words or phrases such as 'first-generation graduate' or 'first in family' have both material and symbolic meaning. Such a cultural model is referred to as a 'figure'.

In homage to Bakhtin, Holland *et al.* (1998) refer to the 'space of authoring' (p. 170) that is complementary to Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development'. Within this, they adopt the notion of 'dialogism' (p. 169), and that individual speech and action are always in dialogue and responsive to others and context. 'Dialogism' reflects how individuals always exist in a process of addressing and answering, within a context that can include specific interlocutors (e.g. a research interviewer, family members) but also the wider imagined social context in which they find themselves. Bakhtin coined the terms 'addressivity' and 'answerability' (quoted by Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 272), arguing that no-one speaks as a freewheeling individual separate from the context they inhabit. Data presentation will show how graduates—when speaking of family—often evoke vividly, actual and imagined conversations they had with family members. Methodologically, the concept of 'dialogism' is important as it argues that all communication is intersubjective and how people speak is continually influenced by a multitude of social and cultural discourses, some of which can be channelled through family.

Individuals 'self-author' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 170) their identities using the cultural tools that their historical context gives them, speaking in different genres as they generate 'narratives' (p. 53) about themselves. Arguably, dominant discourses of graduate employability and careers have certain 'narratives' which underscore how individuals construct meaning (Pryor and Bright, 2008). Major 'narratives' (or what they also refer to as 'standard plots') include the 'narratives' of mobility ('rags to riches') and transformation ('re-birth'), which are associated with the 'public story of higher education' (Brooks and Waters, 2017; Finn and Holton, 2019). The 'narrative' of adversity ('overcoming the monster') is associated with neoliberal ideas of 'grit' (Duckworth, 2016) and more recently 'resilience' (Burke and Scurry, 2019). Within 'narrative', it is common for characters to become 'narrativised' (e.g. in the case of family, graduates may depict parents and siblings as role models or anti-role models).

In addition to 'narrative', 'voice' is an important thinking tool within 'space of authoring'. Holland *et al.* (1998) usefully apply Bakhtin's term 'heteroglossia' to describe how individuals orchestrate or can be ventriloquated by what can be competing 'voices' at times. 'Voices' can be from a variety of sources. However, the 'voices' of family can be observed through 'voices' that graduates respond to as they craft their identity dialogically. We utilise Holland *et al.*'s (1998) adaptation of Bakhtin's 'I positions' (pp. 173–179), in relation to 'voice', whereby the 'I-for-myself' or 'I-for-itself' realises itself and is made known to itself explicitly through engagement with the words of others (i.e. the 'I-for-others' and the 'other-in-myself'); in addition, the 'I-for-itself' will also assert itself in claiming what it is not (i.e. the 'not-I-in-me'). Thus, they argue, 'the self authors itself, and is thus made knowable, in the words of others'. Analysis of data using the 'I' positions requires close attention to how participants reflect upon the significance of others as they tell their stories. The role of 'others' in the construction of 'identity in practice' is significant and influential to habitus/'history-in-person', which—importantly for our analysis—we consider as porous, and open to change.

The orchestration of 'voices' connects to individual perceptions of 'positionality' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 271), which is linked to perceptions of power, status and rank. 'Positionality' in Figured Worlds follows in the footsteps of Bourdieusian ideas of power and status emanating from field position, based on the resources required to access that position and the symbolic capital that is subsequently accessed (Bourdieu, 1984). Emphasis in analysis is placed upon how meaning of 'positionality' is made by individuals as opposed to how it is attributed by others. Holland *et al.* (1998) explore 'positional identity' (p. 220) not as an unconscious habitus, but as: 'a person's apprehension of her social position in a lived world; that is, depending on the others present, of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and through those genres, "authoritative voices", or any "voice" at all' (pp. 127–128). Finally, within the construct of 'world making', they draw together Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnivalesque' and Vygotsky's notion of 'serious play' (p. 272) in order to explore how the 'space of authoring' may offer scope for challenging powerful rules. They argue that individuals may create new ways of thinking and acting, by the orchestration of the different 'voices', 'narratives' and discourses available to them within 'figured worlds'.

In summary, the application of thinking tools from Figured Worlds theory is adopted to explain and analyse graduate reflections upon family. It is a theory that has been used widely in the social sciences, but has not been applied within the discipline of career scholarship. We aim to use it to illuminate ordinary lives in a way that has not been done previously. In a context in which graduates face increasing pressure to author and brand themselves in heavily scrutinised and packaged ways (e.g. via social media), Figured Worlds theory—with its close attention to language—can illuminate graduates' self-authoring in more nuanced and critical ways.

The research project

The context of the study was a subsection of the graduate population (2014) of one university in the North of England, which has fluctuating mid-ranking status. It has

courses that are more vocationally oriented and draws upon many non-traditional students. The study was mixed methods one, but this article primarily draws upon data from research interviews, conducted between 18 and 22 months after graduating. Participants in the study were volunteers who responded to an invitation sent to all graduates of relevant disciplines. Fourteen interview participants (see Table 1) from the original study are utilised for this article, from those not from a higher professional or managerial background, and who are categorised as working class, based on their self-reporting in the project's initial survey of occupational family backgrounds (as per Registrar General classification) and subsequent questioning at interview. The complexity of using class categories is acknowledged and an approach similar to the Paired Peers project study is followed (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013), which includes both unambiguously working class (manual and unskilled occupations) as well as those who are more ambiguously working class (non-manual occupations but with lack of qualifications and/or having moved from lower echelons).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by telephone or Skype, depending on participant preference. Interviews were informed by biographical interview methods (Roberts, 2002), as well as studies that have utilised Figured Worlds in research interviews (Williams, 2011; Solomon, 2012). Biographical

Table 1.   Details of participants

Participant categories	Numbers of participants in each category
Subject grouping	Arts, creative arts, humanities (n-11)
	Business and law (n-3)
Gender	Male (n-7)
	Female (n-7)
Age	23/24 (n-14)
Ethnicity	White British (n-9)
	Asian (n-3)
	Black Caribbean (n-1)
	Mixed Other (n-1)
Family background (occupational)	Skilled non-manual (n-3)
	Skilled manual (n-5)
	Partly skilled (n-1)
	Unskilled (n-4)
	Disabled cannot work (n-1)
Main career/employment status (18 months after graduation)	Graduate role (n-5)
	Non-graduate role (n-4)
	Travelling (n-2)
	Further study (n-2)
	Unemployed (n-1)
Pre-HE location	City in North of England where university is (n-10)
	Other Northern region (n-3)
	Midlands (n-1)
Home location (18 months after graduation)	Family home in city in North of England (n-8)
	Family home in other Northern region (n-3)
	Overseas (n-3)

interviewing provided an ideal way to explore how participants reflect on their past and what has brought them to where they are now. Specific questions were included in the interviews which are of relevance to kin and non-kin support (e.g. who participants sought advice from, and how they perceived the influence and usefulness of family). Ethical approval to conduct the study was organised via the university, which sponsored the research, and additional permission for fieldwork was secured through the university host. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, which allowed for scrutiny of content.

Analytically, the study draws upon Figured Worlds thinking tools, primarily drawing upon tools within the constructs of 'space of authoring' but also 'positionality' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, pp. 271–272). A Figured Worlds analysis plays close textual attention to elements of language (e.g. use of specific vocabulary, the imagery, tropes and repetitions that are used). Analysis required a deep immersion in data, which was influenced by established practices in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008) and inductive research, so although guided by theory, it was open to the discovery of new patterns. A systematic process of coding and re-coding occurred, culminating in a theoretically sensitised presentation of data. A small selection of that data is presented in the findings, as indicative of recurring themes of interest.

Findings

An immediate observation about the working-class graduates in this study is that returning and/or remaining at home with family were very common experiences for them, which supports what existing research tells us (Ball, 2018; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). The data in Table 1 illustrates that 11 of the 14 graduates were still living at family homes nearly 2 years after graduating, sharing a close physical proximity to family. The three that are not, are travelling and working overseas, demonstrating some elasticity (Finn, 2016a). Although some felt stuck and expressed frustration at the lack of independence and even interference from their parents, the support of family was a powerful anchor for many. All participants appeared to accept sanguinely this prolonged dependency, perhaps because it is normal amongst their peers. The following examples seek to unpick how participants' closest relationships inform their stories. They illustrate two broad groupings, those for whom family is clearly articulated as salient and those who are seeking to be distinct from family. In our theoretically sensitised analysis of data, we borrow the words 'salience' from Holland *et al.*(1998) and 'distinction' from Bourdieu (1984), which help illuminate different depictions of family. Distinction as a concept is used by Bourdieu to mean the process by which an individual stands out from a crowded field and illustrates a sense of difference that is to be strived for and respected. Holland *et al.*(1998) use the word salience repeatedly in their reporting on research on a university campus, as they capture a process of identification and social interaction, through which students develop an understanding of what is important to them (p. 116). The words 'distinction' and 'salience' resonate with the various ways individuals develop what Bourdieu calls a 'feel for the game' and Holland and co-workers call 'savoir faire', as they move into their graduate lives. Our sample of 14 graduates was evenly split between 'distinction'

and 'salience' at the time of research interviews; such categorisation of their family reflexivity is temporal and subject to change.

Articulations of salience

Within this first findings section, we illustrate the role of family in different ways that help graduates understand their own stories, focusing on the influence of siblings, mothers and a positive awareness of class positioning. Constraints of space limit the examples drawn upon.

Two graduates, Ravi[2] and Farzana[3], follow in their siblings' footsteps. Fraternal bonds support them as they pursue structured career pathways in teaching and accountancy, respectively, which promise clear occupational mobility. Both are the youngest of their families and have been encouraged by their parents to read for a degree. However, their older siblings are able to share strategic expertise with them, which is more directive than just supportive. We draw upon Ravi in illustrative detail here. He is ambitious but pragmatic about his career. His father is a taxi driver and his mother a housewife, and all his siblings work in education. For him, work in the field of education offers clear chances of mobility, as it did for his siblings. He chose education instead of pursuing accountancy (his degree subject) after he did not secure a graduate role speedily on graduation. He recounts the conversations he had with his brother and has dialogically responded to how his brother may see him, illustrating an 'I-for-others' voice as he imagines proving himself to his older sibling:

> *My brother as well he supports me a lot, he's assistant principal now, he's only been teaching for 8 years and he's already an assistant principal and I think looking up to him, I want to do that or surpass him... out of willingness to say, 'you know what you've done well and I also want to do well'...*

> *I'd say my biggest motivator is my brother though, ... He's kind of like, 'I'm not going to let you go into a standard job where you're not earning money, you need to stand on your own two feet'...*

Ravi's options and potential trajectory have been expanded by his siblings' successful careers in education, which has more accessible and transparent entry routes than many other graduate sectors/careers. His subjective expectations of a rapid entry to accountancy did not meet the conditions of the labour market, and due to limited economic capital, he had to recalculate rather than sit and wait. He drew on the other resources he had, including his family, to provide guidance, which expanded and influenced his 'space of authoring' and ultimately his 'identity in practice'.

Farzana and Ravi both evoke their siblings as important enablers in their paths, which represent a dominant 'narrative' of mobility, associated with higher education. Both come from quite typical British Asian working-class families, and their journey through and out of education may not have been as successful if it were not for their siblings. They orchestrate dialogically family voices as the 'I-for-others' and 'others-in-me', and neither desire a dissociation from family. Their emerging 'I-for-itself' voice is collaborative in its origin, and shapes their 'space of authoring'. Their siblings have been a safety net for them in weathering the challenging turbulence of life after graduation, and have provided valuable advice to insulate them from adversity.

Notably, they are also very active in their respective communities. There is an implication that their connection to family connects to their own assumptions about the value of contributing to their local communities, and having the status of a professional graduate career aids them in so doing. The important role of siblings in crafting stories supports what Davies (2015) has observed in her research with school students.

Ruby[4] and Isabelle[5] share stories of their respective mothers' late return to education as an important inspiration for them, orchestrating an 'others-in-me' voice, as this has opened up possibilities for them both. Each of their mothers went to university later in life and graduated when their daughters were in their teens. As such, both young women evoke the transformational 'character' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 127) of a 'mature woman student' and how this benefits children, not just their mothers. Ruby's words illustrate this theme emphatically: 'My mum's been my most influential person – she's a total rock star'. She talks about her mother's career as a professional wrestler turned artist (her mother also works at the local supermarket in order to supplement her income from art). Her mother completed a degree in art at a local college, a couple of years before Ruby, so their journey as artists has been close. This personal history adds to Ruby's identity as someone with an unconventional background, suitably befitting an artist. Her mother brought her up as a single parent. Returning home has meant that Ruby has a readymade studio, and artistic collaborator, although she also describes the challenge of being with her mother so much:

> . . . so in the '70s and '80s she wrestled all around the world, all around the UK. So many interesting life stories that she shares every day, and that really influenced her art work and her as a person and her as a woman. . . Um, so you know she's done really well. . .

> So our own house is kind of like a studio, you know every room, you know we do a bit of interior design, we upcycle furniture, it's, me and my mum we do a bit of collaboration on the majority of things. But it's a bit of a love hate relationship um obviously I can't be with my mum like 24:7.

Ruby and also Isabelle have witnessed their mothers' growth through education, and those stories are positioned in their own as symbolic of their own journeys through higher education in terms of personal growth, rather than with normative routes to occupational mobility. As such, they both question a conventional mobility 'narrative', preferring a focus on values and creativity. They both follow the norms and values expressed by their mothers and the environment created by them as an extension. Both want to pursue creative careers, which are typically more precarious, and their stories optimistically resonate with Lehmann's (2009) 'moral capital' and a hope that hard work and determination will pay off and distinguish them eventually.

Charlie[6] and Robert[7] clearly recognise their own 'positionality' (i.e. lack of a conventional advantage possessed by them due to their backgrounds) and illustrate an awareness and desire to challenge wider inequalities. Both Charlie and Robert are proud to claim the 'figure' of being the 'first in family' to go to university and the associated social mobility 'narrative'. Charlie is mindful of inequalities in his chosen field (the arts industry) and how those who are well connected have more chances, whereas his father is just a mechanic and his mother a 'stay-at-home mum'. However, he looks to the future, and using an 'I-for-others' voice is hopeful that he might be

able to help others from the same less advantaged background as him if he reaches 'the top':

> *My whole goal is to progress and work my way up this ladder when it comes to being a creative, to the point where I can then start sharing it with other people. I don't want to get to the top and then forget about the bottom because obviously at this moment in time, that's currently where I am.*

Robert argues against default notions that coming from a poorer background should mean lower aspirations in telling his story. His father is disabled and cannot work, his mother is his father's carer, and that family background of not working is what motivates him to defy stereotyped expectations and do well for himself in the future. An 'others-in-me' voice emerges as he credits his ambition to his family. At the time of the research interview, he was working in a bar in Canada. He has considerable warmth towards his parents, but has chosen to make a physical move away from them. His desire to 'escape' his home town is strong and he has embarked on this work and travel experience very positively, which has built his confidence. We observe loyalty, alongside a desire to have distance. The role of family is key to how he narrates his story and works to help his emerging identity and claiming of 'I-for-it-self':

> *Well for me I think the reason I have so much desire to essentially succeed in, you know my interests, you know my parents they don't work. My dad's disabled and my mum cares for him… And not in the sense that he isn't capable of doing things for himself, he just finds it difficult to walk and he only has vision in one of his eyes so it would be really hard for him to find work. So yeh for me I'm the only one in my family to have gone to college and to have gone to university so I think. There was never a spoken pressure there, it was probably just a pressure on myself to go, well I'm the only one who's done this, 'well I'd better get it right'.*

Both Charlie and Robert illustrate a warmth towards their families and pride in their backgrounds. Their words share something of what Loveday (2015) has written about in terms of individuals who do not want to turn their backs on their backgrounds. Robert challenges the aspirations-deficit discourse (Harrison and Waller, 2018) that has been present in public policy. They demonstrate a tentative social class solidarity as they consider their lack of advantage with regard to 'positionality'.

In search of distinction

In this second findings section, we highlight graduates who more clearly want to be distinct from their families. The first pair, from typical white British working-class backgrounds, are dismissive of how their parents can help them. A third example graduate also dismisses his family, while failing to recognise numerous instances of how they have helped him.

Dylan[8] and Joe[9] both present their families with some frustration and even embarrassment. For them, their families are presented as a distraction to them in terms of the advice and support they can offer. Living at home, they are proximate to family and regularly discuss potential careers, but both employ a 'not-I-in-me' voice as they separate themselves from the advice offered to them. They differ from the 'salient' graduate Robert, who attributes his ambition to his family, despite their inability to help him. We draw upon Joe in illustrative detail here. He aspires to use his games

design degree in a job, gently dismisses his family's advice and is exasperated by their lack of understanding of his preferred occupation. Their lack of economic capital means that they have been unable to protect him from getting embroiled in job centre processes, which have led him into some poor-quality placements, rendering him 'stuck', berating his own inability to find good work. When asked about his family's influence, he responds:

> *Er, sort of but not in a really positive way, nothing like, my parents always said like, don't do what we did, go get the degree and it will help. So in a sense like that because they pushed me to get a degree so I could get a better job than what they had so yeh… Cos the career I'm looking at is quite heavily computer based and my mum doesn't really understand computers so a lot of the time she'll say, 'oh saw this job in the (paper) it said computers on it…', and I'll say, 'they're different type of computers, it's not the type I do'…*

The final graduate under examination, Ibrahim[10], wants to pursue a career as a film director, which is one that has few structured entry routes. While proudly drawing upon the 'figure' of being 'first in family' to go to university, he glosses over his family's contribution to his career plans, illustrating a 'not-I-in-me' voice. However, there are many clues to the research interviewer (first author) that their support has been crucial (unlike Joe and Dylan). Notably, a Figured Worlds application of 'dialogism' encourages a focus on all interactions in a research context (including researcher and researched), and 'blind spots' were observed in Ibrahim's perspective on family. For example, he glosses over the important convenient location of his family home for university and work opportunities, where he has lived continuously. Additionally, Ibrahim's family actively discouraged him from doing part-time work during his education, saying that he should focus on his studies, and they would financially support him; illustrating a notable priority given to education and an acquiescence to family wishes on his part. However, Ibrahim laments the lack of practical advice concerning the labour market, due to his 'first in family' position:

> *It was really difficult (after graduating) because I was in my family the first person to ever go to university so in terms of trying to get advice about oh what should I do now, I didn't have that sort of anyone to ask because I don't think anybody really knows how universities work in my family…*

He is proud of what he has done individually, despite his family's lack of knowledge to support him. When questioned, he states that his family have 'no idea' about how to help him get into the film business, however, his family support him financially and are alert to potential opportunities for him. The financial security of living at home has freed him up to engage in creative projects, including writing and managing a touring show as an undergraduate. It seems as if, unexpectedly, his parents' unwillingness to let him work, alongside his happiness to continue living at home, is paying off for him. Ibrahim employs the 'narrative' of mobility in an individualistic way, which leads him to dissociate his identity from that of his family and present a distinct image of himself. His depiction of not being allowed to work and the priority given to education by his family resonates with a faith in education as an occupational mobiliser, but also contradicts what is assumed about working-class students' financial hardship.

Conclusions and discussion

Graduates' reflections upon family, as they author themselves, serve to reveal the limitations of dominant notions of individualist employability in which individuals are represented as highly rational and autonomous. Family is important in maintenance of morale and stability, as graduates cope with uncertain career transitions, irrespective of whether useful connections are provided. Being able to turn to family is crucial when economic independence is much tougher, and is normalised for this generation of graduates (Clarke, 2018b). The importance of social support (Duffy *et al.*, 2016) as a moderator for individuals is evident, even if this does not readily confer capitals that translate into instrumentalist career benefits. The deep relational and intergenerational bonds that have been reported upon in the literature emerge (Brooks, 2003; Finn, 2016b); all such relationships are anchoring, but can be manifested in different ways. The research project was able to probe the role of family, which is often overlooked in university contexts. Deep bonds with family were evident amongst participants, and the rich hinterland that lay behind them was varied and compelling.

In our presentation of findings, we have illustrated how Figured Worlds constructs and tools can illuminate everyday family relationships in ways that a classic Bourdieusian analysis cannot. Holland *et al.*(1998) take issue with Bourdieu's early focus on the enduring nature of habitus, preferring to argue that small improvisations can occur in more routine ways, often as individuals enlist the resources that are at their disposal. We have proposed the empirical and theoretical categorisations of 'salience' and 'distinction' to capture two broad groupings of graduate. Family from a Bourdieusian sense is a source of habitus and capitals to engender practice; as such it is often seen as an enabler, where middle-class parents insulate their children through resources (Devine, 2004) and where working-class parents have limited opportunities and resources to offer similar support to their children (Burke, 2015). Our use of Figured Worlds has led us to reveal how working-class families may also insulate their graduate sons and daughters but in different ways than the middle classes (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). In this section, we would like to present a number of conceptual tools from Figured Worlds to unpack and account for our findings. These constructs/tools are not sequential in analytical practice, although they are presented here as such for clarity.

The construct of the 'space of authoring' (the resources available to author self with scope for world making) provides useful tools to do finely grained textual analysis, which can illustrate what resources working-class graduates secure from their families. In reporting on these stories of family, themes of interest emerged which illustrate how graduates draw upon their family, though not in ways that give them access to what might be deemed 'valuable social capital' (Purcell *et al.*, 2013). However, arguably the resources they do get from family (e.g. through siblings) can help them in developing other capitals, especially cultural capital and understanding a Bourdieusian 'feel for the game' (see Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013) or the 'savoir faire' described by Holland *et al.*(1998). Figured Worlds offers ways to understand sibship, in ways that a Bourdieusian emphasis on parent/child relationships cannot. For our 'salient graduates', through the orchestration of 'voices' and 'narratives', families provided practical resources in the form of useful know-how. In the case of Ravi, who had

originally planned to be an accountant, once his original plans were not realized, it was the practical experience and advice from his siblings that provided him with tools for an expanded 'space of authoring'. Whereas for the 'distinct graduates', it was the perceived lack of resources from family which led them to reject advice and seek out resources from other avenues, which can take on an individualistic tone, most clearly illustrated by Ibrahim. Another resource that family provided for 'self-authoring' was justification or legitimacy of choices and pathways. This is particularly acute in the case of Ruby, whose mother had an unconventional career and returned to education later in life. Thus, we can see parallels between Ruby's trajectory and her mother's. However, rather than presenting this as an example of the durable inculcation of habitus, this is an agentic process whereby Ruby's mother is an influence rather than a blueprint.

Participants' ability to author selves is influenced by their ability to be reflexive with regard to 'positionality' (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 271). Dylan and Joe are acutely aware of the lack of useful career contacts and knowledge stemming from their family backgrounds. They articulate the perceived deficiencies of parents, who are unable to help them in securing an aspirational mobility 'narrative' (Brooks and Waters, 2017; Finn and Holton, 2019); while also appearing to put pressure on their sons to live up to parental hopes that their offspring will be socially mobile. In contrast, Charlie and Robert—who show similar awareness of a disadvantaged 'positionality'—are crafting ways to position their families as 'characters' in their stories more positively, with indicators of class consciousness that can embrace some solidarity and reject an aspirations-deficit discourse (Harrison and Waller, 2018). The construct of 'positionality' suggests that individuals require understanding of how they are positioned (which close family status does tend to exemplify), if they are to be agentic. However, having awareness of one's 'positionality' is an initial stage; the next is to know how to approach and manage what that position represents. This latter issue is complex and challenges educators to foster reflexivity and critical consciousness positively; Scurry *et al.* (2020) argue that this balancing act is fundamental in pursuing social justice through education. An awareness of how inequalities may be shared can be observed in Charlie and Robert's words, which contradict the idea that working-class students will dissociate from their family identity when going to university (Loveday, 2015).

Alongside constructing family members as 'characters' in their 'narratives', our graduates also imagine themselves using certain 'figures'. In particular, the repeated reference to the term 'first-generation graduate' by participants is notable. This phrase illustrates the coming together of the material and symbolic. It is based on material reality that an individual is 'first in family' to go to university, but becomes a symbol of something more, an indicator of an individual's hard work and ability to craft their own path, which connects to 'narratives' of mobility (Brooks and Waters, 2017; Finn and Holton, 2019) and adversity (Duckworth, 2016; Burke and Scurry, 2019). We observe how this has a strong resonance that participants identify with, becoming part of their 'history-in-person'. In constructing a 'narrative', individuals answer such cultural models of emotional importance. Meanwhile, we also observe family depicted as 'characters' in individual stories, both as role models and anti-role models. Ravi, Farzana, Ruby and Isabelle present family members as models to follow; empirically, the role of siblings and mothers as lifelong learners appears as a way

in which families influence. In contrast, Dylan, Joe and Ibrahim present their parents as anti-role models, definitely not to be followed, due to their lack of knowledge and connections.

'Dialogism' is crucial to the 'space of authoring' and illuminates issues of 'addressivity' and 'answerability' (quoted by Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 272) as individuals recount dialogue with family, but also orchestrate different 'voices' and 'narratives' in how they reflect upon themselves. We have adopted the use of the 'I positions' (pp. 173–179) to explore how individuals incorporate the 'voices' of others in how they tell their stories. Theoretically, Holland *et al.*(1998) argue that individuals must consciously orchestrate the 'others-in-me' and 'I-for-others' voices in order to craft an 'I-for-itself' voice, while also recognising what 'voices' they reject (i.e. the 'not-I-in-me'). Not everyone will consciously orchestrate these 'voices', as some may be ventriloquated by what has been said to them, or say what they think others wish to hear. Many of the participants included here demonstrated reflexive awareness of the 'voices' of family. Returning to the argument that family can provide legitimacy of choices and pathways, this legitimacy is provided through a dialogic orchestration of 'voices' into practice, rather than simply followed in an overly structural model. 'Voices' of family are only one layer of 'voices' individuals are exposed to, and compete with other societal discourses/voices which can be channelled in a variety of ways (Christie, 2019). Other significant 'voices' present in this dialogic exchange include dominant 'narratives' in higher education about what it is to be a successful graduate, with priority given to financial returns. Importantly for some 'salient graduates', such as Ravi and Farzana, family 'voices' echoed that of higher education 'narratives', whereas for participants such as Ruby these 'voices' presented quite contrasting messages. Importantly, these processes are not passive nor are they an unarticulated 'inheritance', but rather an agentic process between individuals, their immediate context and wider policy narratives.

'Dialogism' and the 'voices' that participants engage with are useful when examining the 'distinct graduates'. As discussed above, participants from this group have in part estranged themselves from their families and actively blocked out familial 'voice', and instead may risk immersion in a highly individualised neoliberal 'narrative'. The extent of this is clear from Ibrahim's belief that his success was largely of his own making, in which the 'voice' of the 'neoliberal social imaginary' presents the individual as freewheeling. 'Distinct graduates' Joe and Dylan also present an individualised world but differently from Ibrahim, who is self-congratulatory. They illustrate how individuals may blame themselves or close contextual factors if they are not successful, rather than reflecting upon wider structural issues. Joe berates his own inability to get work while also expressing disappointment as a consumer of higher education for whom benefits have not translated well. He appears stuck in a constrained 'space of authoring', unable to draw upon resources that offer him a way to improvise. Neoliberal 'narratives' are effectively a one-way dialogue providing ideology and character recommendations, but not reflexive resources that can add to an expanded 'space of authoring'. This observation has led us to question whether some 'distinct graduates' are orchestrating or being ventriloquated by individualised 'voices' and 'narratives'.

To conclude, we contend that it is wrong to consider that there is a binary opposition in relation to social background and career advantages, and that those from

working-class backgrounds are always the losers. There is evidence that many of the graduates presented here have drawn upon personally enriching resources in how they tell their stories. We have identified the two categories of 'salient' and 'distinct' to exemplify the various ways that family is presented. In so doing we have adapted constructs and tools, from Figured Worlds theory (most importantly its emphasis on self-authoring and language), in order to depart from a classic Bourdieusian analysis of social class. We observe that significant reflexive work is undertaken for individuals in the development of their 'identity in practice'. However, it appears that those who are able to reflexively find salience in their family background have a 'space of authoring' that offers some scope for world making, in contrast to those that we categorise as seeking distinction who appear to orchestrate fewer and less productive reflexive resources.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval was secured through Lancaster University as sponsor of the research undertaken, and permission to conduct the research was secured through another university which acted as host for the study.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest associated with this research.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

NOTES

[1] Figured Worlds is the name of the theory as a whole; figured worlds (in lower case) is one of the four constructs of the whole theory.
[2] Ravi: accounting and finance, Asian, social background—unskilled.
[3] Farzana: accounting and finance, Asian, social background—skilled manual.
[4] Ruby: visual arts, white British, social background—skilled manual.
[5] Isabelle: graphic design, white British, social background—skilled non-manual.
[6] Charlie: performance, white British, social background—unskilled.
[7] Robert: film studies, white British, social background—disabled cannot work.
[8] Dylan: history, white British, social background—partly skilled.

[9] Joe: games design, white British, social background—unskilled.
[10] Ibrahim: English, Asian, social background—skilled non-manual.

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