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**Published version**

MORRISON, Andrew (2014). 'I think that's bad' : lay normativity and perceived barriers to employment in primary teaching in the UK. *Sociology*, 49 (4), 643-659.

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# **‘I think that’s bad’: Lay Normativity and Perceived Barriers to Employment in Primary Teaching in the UK**

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**Abstract:** *This paper reports the results of a small-scale study into undergraduates’ perceptions of possible barriers to obtaining employment within primary teaching in the UK. The investigation focused upon barriers related to accent and gender. The study sample was a group of final-year undergraduates on an Education Studies degree at a university in South Wales. The study employed a three-part theoretical framework, drawing upon the work of Bourdieu, Andrew Sayer’s discussion of lay normativity and Nancy Fraser’s theory of two-dimensional social justice, to analyse the students’ perceptions of (in)justice deriving from perceived barriers. Results from seven focus groups indicated the students perceived employment-related impediments from processes of misrecognition and maldistribution in primary teaching recruitment. However, the students held complex views on these issues. The majority also voiced discourses which, it could be argued, serve to further the reproduction of such processes of maldistribution and misrecognition.*

**Keywords:** Gender; Higher Education; Inequality; Social Justice

## **Introduction**

This paper reports the results of a small-scale qualitative investigation into undergraduates’ perceptions of possible barriers to obtaining employment within primary teaching in the UK. The barriers focused upon in this study related to accent and gender. The study also examined the students’ sense of (in)justice in relation to perceived barriers. The study sample was a group of final-year undergraduates on an Education Studies degree at a post-1992 university in South Wales. The students were largely female and could be categorised as working-class in terms of parental occupation. Among the case-study sample, teaching is the most popular

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career destination, and all of the participants of this study had indicated an intention to become primary school teachers. This study addresses an issue of considerable importance which serves to address wider sociological questions. Firstly, by investigating the undergraduates' perceptions of possible barriers to employment in primary teaching, the research has thrown a light on the students' perceptions of the 'fairness' of an important area of the UK graduate labour market. In this respect, the study seeks to contribute to a growing body of research which has examined (under)graduates' perceptions of the influence of social categories such as gender and other social factors upon personal employability (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson 2007). Secondly, by examining the students' sense of (in)justice in relation to perceived barriers, the study has sought to understand their beliefs about what they feel *should* be fair treatment. This has revealed the complex nature of social actors' views on an issue of importance to them.

The study employs a three-part theoretical framework. The article begins with a discussion of the conceptual tools of Bourdieu—habitus, capital and field—which the study applies to capture the fine grain *relational* nature of the students' perceptions of barriers. Following this, I explain how Sayer's (2005) discussion of lay normativity offers a rationale for investigating the students' beliefs regarding the (in)justice related to perceived barriers. From lay normativity, the paper moves on to a discussion of Nancy Fraser's theory of two-dimensional social justice. This offers a critically normative framework to theorise the students' claims for justice.

### **The Bourdieusian Schema and Accent and Gender**

Bourdieu's theory of practice, with its three key concepts of the habitus, field and capital, offers a way of understanding the relationship between micro-level subjectivities and

objective structural relations. The habitus, which represents the micro-level side of the dialectical relationship, refers to an individual's set of dispositions by which they navigate their way through the social world. Dispositions are inculcated early in life through socialisation and function at a largely subconscious level in a way that influences both thought and action, producing what Bourdieu (1990) terms 'practical sense'. However, the theory of practice stresses the relational nature of social life: particular practices should not be seen as the product of the habitus *per se* but of the *relation* between the habitus and the particular field/s within which the individual acts (Bourdieu, 1990). Within the theory of practice, the concept of field represents the objective side of the equation. Individuals, institutions and collectivities all exist in some form of competitive structured social relation to one another where positions are determined by the types of resources, or 'capital', that individuals can bring to the field. This may be economic capital (i.e. material wealth) or different types of 'cultural capital' (educational qualifications, embodied cultural attributes such as a sense of social self confidence or a particular style of comportment). Crucially, fields permit some forms of capital (e.g. economic capital) to be converted into other forms (e.g. the different forms of cultural capital) and vice versa, and it is this property that gives fields their dynamic nature as a site of struggles between individuals (Bourdieu, 1997).

### **Linguistic capital as an axis of social differentiation**

As Sayer (2005: 73) notes, by showing the inter-relationship between the different forms of capital, Bourdieu is able to show that differentiation lies along several axes and not just one, and that an individual's position within a field will depend upon both the volume *and* the composition of the different forms of capital to which they have access. Following this framework, accent is understood as one axis among others along which social differentiation

is drawn. For, despite the decline of the traditionally hegemonic ‘Received Pronunciation’ (RP) accent in the UK and a relative democratization in attitudes towards linguistic diversity, it has been argued that regional accents (and this would encompass many of the different accents within the nations of Scotland and Wales) continue to be ranked as less socially prestigious than the regionally ‘neutral’ RP (Mugglestone, 2003; Snell, 2013). All of the participants for this study were from Wales, and the majority were from the South Wales’ Valleys. Research has indicated that speakers of this particular accent attract markedly negative stereotypes in terms of perceived educational attainments, particularly when compared with speakers of the RP accent (Garrett, Coupland and Williams, 1999: 341). Thus, there is evidence that accent remains a factor in inter-subjective power relations and may therefore function as a potential factor in the personal employability of the students of this study. Bourdieu’s work on linguistic exchange offers a way to conceptualise this.

In developing his approach to language, Bourdieu applies and develops the trio of concepts that underpin the wider theory of practice. Thus, Bourdieu views linguistic utterances as products of a relation between an individual’s ‘linguistic habitus’ and the ‘linguistic field/s’ which the habitus encounters (Bourdieu, 1991). The linguistic habitus is a deeply embodied sub-set of the dispositions of an individual’s habitus, for example, a particular accent is the result of a certain mode of moving the tongue or lips, and this is what Bourdieu terms ‘articulatory style’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 86). Linguistic utterances are always produced in particular contexts or fields, and the properties of these fields will endow linguistic products with a certain ‘value’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 67). Through their linguistic habitus an individual will develop a degree of anticipation of the value which their linguistic utterances will be accorded in different fields, e.g. the labour market. This linguistic ‘sense of place’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 82) is a practical competence but the capacity to produce linguistic utterances that are highly valued across different fields is one that is unevenly distributed across society. In other

words, different speakers possess different quantities of 'linguistic capital'. As Thompson (1991: 18) observes, linguistic capital often maps onto other forms of capital which define an individual within social space and, in general, the greater the linguistic capital that an individual has, the more they are able to secure symbolic and material profits from the field.

### **Bourdieu and gender as capital**

Primary-phase teaching is highly sex-segregated and is also subject to normalised gendered stereotypes that position women as more nurturing and thus better suited to the teaching of young children (Drudy, 2008: 312). The focus on gender was considered important in view of the prevalent policy-level concern over the 'lack' of male teachers within primary teaching (Dermott, 2011), and the students' views on the likely impact of this upon recruitment. Bourdieu's concepts have been applied to this issue but with the proviso of some valuable feminist critique. For example, as Skeggs (2004) has noted, for Bourdieu all cultural capital is gendered, that is, shaped by gendered dispositions. This offers the insight that gender operates as a 'hidden' category and, thus, as a powerful form of 'misrecognition' whereby underlying power relations are disguised through processes of cultural normalisation. As Skeggs (2004) points out, however, this view ignores gender as a source of domination and subordination in its own right. For example, Skeggs (2004: 24) argues that some forms of masculinity (within a classed hierarchy) function as symbolic capital and thus as a form of domination. By contrast, Skeggs (2004) argues that women (particularly working-class women) are rarely able to accrue symbolic capital from femininity except when their femininity is legitimated by men and is attached to other forms of power.

Thus, Bourdieu offers a sophisticated theoretical framework through which to conceptualise the power relations that underlie the students' perceptions of possible barriers to primary

teaching employment. However, as Thompson (1991: 31) notes, although Bourdieu's work offers real critical potential, it is above all a sociological theory, not a normative political theory. In the next section, I shall suggest that an understanding of lay social actors' normative beliefs, which is still a relatively under-researched area, should be an important area of investigation for social scientists and, in particular, I shall discuss how an understanding of lay normativity has been of relevance to the empirical focus of this study.

### **Lay Normativity**

As Sayer (2005: 5) argues, in everyday life, the most important questions are usually normative ones: our sense of what is good or bad, what we or others should do, and how we or others should behave in that respect. Sayer (2005: 4) points out that lay normativity may frequently be inconsistent or incoherent—for example, by both expecting respect yet denying it to others. In relation to class (the focus of Sayer's discussion), this occurs because social actors often justify inequalities by reference to moral arguments--that is, class differences are held to reflect differences in individuals' moral worth rather than be seen as products of societal inequalities. By contrast, gender does not usually attract moral ascriptions. Instead, as Sayer (2005: 74) observes, lay concepts of gender are fundamentally naturalised and, thus, while social actors may espouse egalitarian principles they may also draw upon normalised assumptions about appropriately gendered appearance or behaviour.

As I shall discuss, this study offers evidence of just such tensions and apparent contradictions in the students' comments about accent and gender-related barriers to primary-phase teaching employment. However, it is precisely because of the complex nature of lay normativity that we should seek to better understand it. As Sayer (2005: 7) contends, the moral pre-suppositions of lay normativity form the rationale for individuals' commitments and identities and, as such, they are what matter to them. Thus, despite the frequently

contradictory nature of lay normativity, in general we will usually expect to be treated equally, that is, with respect and as of equal moral worth; however, as Sayer (2005: 4) notes, in contemporary society we will also encounter obvious inequalities in terms of both recognition and distribution of resources. Again, as I shall discuss, this study found clear evidence from among the participants of both the belief in a moral right to recognitional and distributional justice within the field of primary teaching employment, but also the expectation that they would, to some degree, be unjustly dealt with in such terms within that field. It is necessary, however, to examine what is meant by recognitional and distributional justice and the nature of their inter-relationship. Here, I turn to Nancy Fraser's 'two-dimensional' theory of justice which forms the final building block in the theoretical framework of this study.

### **Two-dimensional justice**

Nancy Fraser's theory of two-dimensional justice, elaborated and defended over the course of different publications, is an attempt to bridge what she terms the 'redistribution-recognition dilemma'—the need to address issues of both cultural injustice and economic injustice where they occur within the same population groups (Fraser, 1995: 74). The roots of this dilemma lie in Fraser's argument for the 'bi-valent' nature of key social categories, in particular, class, 'race' and gender. 'Bivalent' means that these social categories are based both in the economic structure and in the cultural status order of society, although not in equal measure. For Fraser (1995: 74) class, 'race' and gender are aligned along a 'conceptual spectrum' of different kinds of social collectivities. Class is ultimately a product of material social relations but can generate cultural subjectivities that may then go on to develop an independent power of their own (Fraser, 1999: 32). By contrast, 'race' and gender are located in the middle of the conceptual spectrum. The existence of these categories is, at base,

contingent upon social actors' belief in them as they are culturally constructed categories. However, 'race' and gender are not *just* products of cultural belief systems—they are also intimately caught up in material social relations. For example, as Fraser (1999: 31) observes, gender structures the primary economic partition between remunerated 'productive' labour and unremunerated 'reproductive' and domestic labour.

The motivation for the development of the two-dimensional theory of justice lies in the position of gender and 'race' along the middle of Fraser's (1995) conceptual spectrum. Fraser (1995: 79-80) argues that the result of this position is that they are the source of two analytically distinct forms of remedy: redistribution and recognition which pull in different directions. The ultimate logic of redistribution would be to efface gender and 'race' as social categories whereas the logic of recognition is to valorise difference (Fraser, 1995: 80). Thus, Fraser (1995: 82) asks, how can feminists and anti-racists pursue both redistributive and recognitional justice? Fraser (1999) proposes a two-dimensional theory of justice which hinges on an understanding of the distinction, and also the relationship between, redistribution and recognition, and class (in the narrow economic sense) and status. This, in turn, rests upon the distinction she offers between economy and culture. For Fraser (1999: 40), economy and culture are 'social processes and social relations' that have emerged historically due to the growing division between class and status under conditions of advanced capitalist societies. For this reason, they are not ontological categories but analytical ones and, by extension, the same holds true with regard to issues of maldistribution and misrecognition (Fraser, 1999: 40). To address the analytical distinction but inter-relationship between these two sources of injustice, '*...one needs an approach that can accommodate differentiation, divergence and interaction at every level*' (Fraser, 1999: 43).

What sort of social theory can handle this task? Fraser (1999) proposes a 'perspectival dualism' by which all social practices are to be considered simultaneously economic and

cultural (although not always in equal measure). Thus, redistribution and recognition are not two substantive domains but are, rather, two perspectives from which we can view the economic dimensions of what are normally considered cultural processes and vice-versa (Fraser, 1999: 45). In more direct terms, this translates into a normative theory of justice, the core of which is ‘parity of participation’, requiring (a) legal equality; (b) distribution of resources and (c) ‘intersubjective equality’ (Fraser, 1999: 137). Both the objective side (ie legal equality, distribution of resources) and the intersubjective side (cultural respect and valorisation) are preconditions for participatory parity and neither alone is sufficient.

Thus, Fraser’s two-dimensional theory of justice coheres well with the Bourdieusian framework outlined above whereby economic capital and the various forms of cultural capital are analytically separable but entwined in concrete circumstances. Taken together, this ‘dual systems’ (Anthias, 2005) approach to economy and culture offers a sophisticated framework through which to approach the empirical focus of this study. For example, this paper is concerned with factors perceived to affect access to employment and, to that extent, it is very obviously concerned with matters of distributional justice or, in Bourdieusian terms, economic capital. However, the factors with which it is concerned—accent and gender—are products of the cultural status order of society, or what Bourdieu terms cultural capital.

## **The Research Study**

### ***Context***

The case-study institution is a post-1992 university in South Wales, recruiting principally from within the South Wales area. Education Studies draws from sociology, philosophy, psychology and history with the aim of presenting a critical approach to education as a field of study. It does not confer Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) but has its roots in teacher

training and is often seen by practitioners and students to be a useful preparation for the profession. To this end, all case-study students are required to attend a short course-related placement (usually school-based). However, if a graduate wanted to become a teacher, they would additionally have to complete a Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), a one-year full-time teacher training course.

### ***The Focus Groups***

The study population was the third year cohort of the BA (Hons) in Education Studies. In the 2013—14 academic year, there were 147 students, of whom 122 (83%) were female and 25 (17%) were male. Using the university's own ethnic categories, the students were asked to categorise themselves. 143 students (97%) described themselves as 'White British', three as 'Asian or Asian British Indian' and one as 'Black or Black British Caribbean'. The purpose of the research was explained to the students, and those interested in participating were asked to put their name on a list of volunteers. Using this list as a sampling frame, the study employed a random stratified sampling approach whereby students were randomly selected from the volunteer list in proportion to the gender composition of the third-year cohort. This produced a sample of 34 females and 7 males distributed across seven focus groups between 6 October 2012 and 21 February 2013.

--Insert Table 1 here--

The sessions took place in available teaching rooms and lasted an average of forty-five minutes. Focus groups were selected for their potential to draw out a group view on a research topic, and for their ability to promote interactive discussion (Gibbs, 2012). Each session was guided by a semi-structured schedule, allowing for a degree of focus but also some latitude for useful diversion or expansion. I took the role of moderator to feed questions

at appropriate intervals but the emphasis was on group interaction and free discussion. Consent was obtained to record the sessions which were transcribed manually. The data was analysed following the Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) model whereby data are 'reduced', categorised into 'themes' and then interpreted theoretically.

All students were asked to complete a brief form indicating parental occupations with the aim of building up a picture of each student's social class of origin. Parental occupations were classified by use of the NS-SEC system categories (ONS, 2005). The study followed the 'simplified' method of occupational class derivation (ONS, 2005: 24) which comprised two stages. Firstly, parental occupations were assigned an 'operational category' from among the 14 functional categories; these categories were then collapsed into one of the eight 'analytic' classes into which occupations are aggregated and which function as descriptors for a range of employment relations (ONS, 2005: 3). Working on the basis of the highest individual parental occupation, it was judged that most parents were employed in 'intermediate' to 'semi-routine' forms of employment, or NS-SEC analytic classes 3 to 6 (ONS, 2005: 9). In more directly sociological terms, the majority of the students were from semi-skilled/skilled working-class or 'new' middle-class (e.g. outside of the established professions) occupational backgrounds.

## **Findings**

### *i) Accent*

Across all seven groups there was a strong perception among the students that their accents would be 'acceptable' or even an advantage in trying to obtain employment in Wales. However, they believed that if they were to seek work in England they would be judged negatively by their accents and encounter prejudice:

*If I went for a job near where I live, I don't think my accent would be a problem at all. But say there was no jobs near where I live and I had to go to England, I think it would probably most definitely affect whether I got the job or not 'cos it's quite strong.* ('Amanda'<sup>2</sup>: Focus Group Six)

**Melanie:** *I know it sounds really bad but I think a lot of Welsh are labelled as sometimes 'thick' maybe 'cos of their accents and things in the media and stuff and I think that maybe they might judge me because of my accent and that I'm not as clever as someone from Oxford who can pronounce their words properly and speak properly.*

**Jade:** *I think if someone from Oxford was sitting next to you or someone who's well-spoken and you're talking with a Welsh twang like we are, I think it would jeopardize [employment opportunities].*

(Focus Group Seven)

Here, it seems that the relatively homogenous nature of the focus groups—all the students were Welsh and most came from the South Wales' Valleys—created its own particular dynamic. Following Bourdieu (1991), the focus groups facilitated group reflection upon the dispositions of a collective linguistic habitus. The students were reflecting upon their 'linguistic sense of place' (Bourdieu, 1991: 82)—that is, exercising a practical sense of anticipation with regard to the likely value accorded to their linguistic utterances within the wider field of primary teaching employment beyond Wales. It was also apparent that many students felt very strongly that any prejudice was unjust as it was considered an irrelevant criterion within the meritocratic principles of 'best person for the job':

**Kim:** *They could have the same ability as someone who speaks la-di-da anyway*

**Rachel:** *I mean, you could even be the best, better person for the job than someone who talks like that.*

**Christine:** *But they might discriminate just 'cos...*

**Rachel:** *Definitely. Personally, I think that's a big factor.*

**Kim:** *It's really unfair though...*

**Amy:** *Yeah, it is unfair but...it's discrimination, isn't it?*

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<sup>2</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

**Kim:** *'Cos people who haven't got, like, anything, their family haven't got any money, they work so hard for it and just because of where they're from then they can't get a job that they're capable of doing, do you know what I mean?*

(Focus Group One)

*I know when I speak sometimes people might think I'm not the brightest, but I do think it's unfair really 'cos you can't judge someone on how they speak really 'cos it's like, I talk like this 'cos where I'm from everyone speaks like this, so it's not anything to do with, 'What's up here?'* ('Sophie': Focus Group Six)

Following Fraser's analytical framework, the students appear to be making a recognitional claim for 'intersubjective' equality—the aspect of justice that requires that “...institutionalized cultural patterns of interpretation and valuation express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem (Fraser, 1999: 37). As discussed previously, this is one of three preconditions for full parity of participation between social actors within Fraser's two-dimensional theory of justice. However, it is clear from the students' comments that, far from being accorded intersubjective equality, they believe that their accents are likely to be subject to injurious processes of misrecognition which may harm their chances of obtaining teaching employment. However, alongside this sense of injustice, there was a perception across the focus groups that accent is important in teaching and that speaking 'properly' had an important professional function. For some students, this was tied to the need to be a 'morally responsible' teacher who did not lead the children 'astray' through their own accent. This was expressed in a certain distancing from and even disavowal of their own accent. There are hints here of Bourdieu's (1991) argument for the way in which a linguistic sense of place acts as an internalised constraint on linguistic

production, thereby having the effect of a form of self-censorship and of hyper self-correction:

*I think it is important for people to understand you because if you've got a really strong accent, not being horrible, discriminating against you, but the children need to understand you. [General agreement]. ('Rachel': Focus Group One)*

**Hannah:** *I definitely find myself talking much better when I'm in the classroom or even in this situation*

**Joanna:** *You're more aware*

**Hannah:** *Yeah, talk more clearly, definitely, yeah, but I think it's just important for young children that you do speak clearly and correctly which is good yeah*

**Melanie:** *It's really important because they're learning off of you.*

(Focus Group Seven)

For other students, the concern about having the 'correct' accent was related to more instrumental reasons, that is, the need to present oneself as 'employable':

*I think it is important. Having known people that have been employed, even if you've got good qualifications, if you weren't able to articulate yourself, you know, fit the mould if you like, then they're less inclined to employ you than someone who's quite well spoken. ('Aimee': Focus Group Four)*

**Interviewer:** *How important do you think your accent is when you are looking for a teaching job?*

**All:** *Massively [general agreement, nodding]*

**Susan:** *The way you speak, the way you talk, the words you use, I think that they really have a massive effect on, like, the interview process. If you go in there speaking all chavvy [general laughter], people are going to be, like where are you from?*

**Jane:** *I think my English speaking is rubbish! My voice is slow! [General laughter]*

**Susan:** *It's true 'cos when you talk to people and you hear the way they speak, it's like errr! [General laughter]*

(Focus Group Two)

Through the conversational dynamics of the groups, some students (as in the comments above) appeared to interpret 'accent' in broader linguistic terms to include issues of grammar and vocabulary. Accent is quite distinct from both of these things, although linguists have long known that accent may easily be conflated with such issues within popular perceptions of language (Snell, 2013). In this case though, the conflation of these issues appears to reflect a real sense of linguistic anxiety that goes beyond accent *per se*. For, as Bourdieu (1991: 78) observes, all language production is characterised by the need for a degree of euphemism or 'compromise formations' that are congruent with the schemes of evaluation of the relevant field. However, language production is also characterised by systematic discrepancies between linguistic fields and the forms of (self)censorship associated with them, and the capacities of individuals to produce linguistic expressions appropriate to the field. Individuals with high levels of cultural capital usually experience a close alignment between their linguistic habitus and the requirements of formal occasions such as job interviews (Bourdieu, 1991: 69). In contrast, the students' comments indicate a collective linguistic habitus that is not comfortably aligned with the anticipated linguistic evaluation schemes of the wider field of primary teaching beyond Wales. One may argue that the students' perceived need to speak 'properly' reflects a rationally adaptive response to a society in which they clearly strongly believe that they will be judged negatively by some people because of their accents or other forms of linguistic production. However, if we again adopt a critical sociological viewpoint, we may also say that the students are 'buying in' to the reproduction of their own oppression: their acceptance of such a value system (however unwillingly) is itself an act of misrecognition that is helping to support societal processes of misrecognition which serve to position their accents negatively. This is the essence of Bourdieu's (1991) argument that the exercise of power through symbolic exchange always rests on a foundation of shared belief. But, again, this returns us to Fraser's (1999: 38) important point that such processes of

misrecognition, and the social relationships which sustain them, are morally indefensible whether or not they distort the subjectivity of the oppressed.

## *ii) Gender*

All the students were well aware of the sex balance of the primary teaching workforce. When questioned whether they believed gender would be a factor in recruitment practices, most of the female students felt that they would suffer from attempts to attract more males into the profession:

*But now, they're crying out for males. Like, up in the school where I am now there was three jobs going 'cos these people, the women, had been there for years and years, and three males got the jobs and I think that had a big factor, to do with the fact that they were male. ('Rachel': Focus Group One)*

*I agree with the girls as well that males do have an advantage. Recently in my mum's school they were meant to be going for a job and it was a girl and a boy and they actually chose the boy probably because he was good for the job as well, but they wanted another male teacher. ('Joanna': Focus Group Seven)*

Of the seven males interviewed in the focus groups, all agreed that being male was very likely to be an advantage in obtaining employment. The following extract is typical:

*From personal experience of going into placements and stuff I've had a lot of head teachers and teachers just going, 'oh you're a man, oh that's great, fantastic'. So, I think it's definitely a bonus being a male in this profession because you are going to be offered jobs. I mean I got work in a nursery 'cos I was a male. I didn't have any previous experience of working with children before, it was literally because I was a male. So yeah, I think it does help a lot. ('Robert': Focus Group Six)*

It was apparent that the perception of favoured treatment for men engendered a general sense of injustice among the female students. It is possible that the sex composition of the focus

groups, and the dynamics within them, may have played a part here as the students within the all-female groups tended to voice sharper criticism in this respect than the female students in the mixed female-male groups. The following exchanges are from all-female groups.

**Interviewer:** *So, are you saying that men would actually be at an advantage?*

**All:** *Oh, definitely, yeah.*

**Rachel:** *A male would be at an advantage. People who graduate now, males would be at an advantage getting a job over us, 'cos it's crap.*

(Focus Group One)

**All:** *They want more males basically...*

**Susan:** *...more male role models. But that's like, they're only saying that because they want more male role models or if there's too many women applying to be a teacher. I think that's bad...*

**Leanne:** *...yeah, not fair*

(Focus Group Two)

Across both the all-female and mixed-sex groups, there emerged a strong shared meritocratic form of discourse whereby all students felt strongly that gender should not be a factor and that the 'best person' for the job should be chosen:

**David:** *I think if a male and female go for a job, I think it should be equal. I don't think they should hire a male just because he's a male. They should, like, have a look at the male's qualities and the female's qualities and then see which one, which qualities, do they need more.*

**Steve:** *It should have been anyway related to the qualifications 'cos at the end of the day, you want good teachers that can teach the children the best rather than a male and a female. That makes no difference, that's my opinion.*

(Focus Group Five)

In Fraser's (1995) terms, the students' comments reflect a claim for distributional equality that is blind to gender. In this respect, as Unterhalter (2007: 88) writes, these views reflect a

notion of gender as a simple descriptive term that has no greater significance than the colour of a person's hair or the date of their birthday. From this perspective, equality is attained through equal numbers or amounts and if these are achieved then no more need be done (Unterhatler, 2007: 89). In significant opposition to this is a view to be found in academic sociological literature whereby gender is a social construct saturated with meanings and shaped by social processes that position men and women in unequal positions of power. Following this understanding of gender, equality is to be achieved by reshaping social relations and institutions and through the contestation of meanings and values (Unterhalter, 2007: 89). As Young (1997: 158-9) notes, feminist politics have long been caught in a dilemma between these two views of gender in their struggle for equality—what she calls the 'equality versus difference' debate.

Thus, while academics and social campaigners may oscillate between different approaches to gender, it should be of no surprise that lay social actors also do so. A switch from a view of gender as more than simply a descriptive term was apparent in the students' comments that male teachers were needed as 'role models'. This was a common theme across all the focus groups and was voiced by many students who had also indicated that they thought that access to primary teaching employment should be gender-neutral. When the students were asked what they meant by 'role models', different views came forward according to the prevailing dynamic of the group, and thus the groups exhibited some tendency towards group consensus. This ability to draw out a collective perspective is an advantage of focus groups, although the researcher should be cognisant that an apparent consensus may mask considerable intra-group heterogeneity (Stokes and Bergin, 2006). As individual follow-up interviews were not conducted for this project, it is not possible to compare any possible 'group effect' against any other source of data. What is clear, however, is that two broad themes emerged which cut across the sex composition of the seven groups, that is, they were

not found predominantly within either all-female or mixed groups. Thus, in some groups, the dominant theme centred upon male teachers' function as role models in relation to their supposedly greater sense of authority and disciplinary control. The following exchanges are typical:

**Sarah:** *Sometimes, I think, in the schools I've been in the children have been really awkward and I've found myself in really sort of a difficult position where I've been quite scared of a pupil, so maybe a male might be more sort of advantaged in that case depending on the area of the school maybe.*

**Catriona:** *I can kind of see that male teachers have got a way about them, they can just like grasp the attention of the class, they are more in control. I don't know, they've got better relationships with the children.*

(Focus Group Five)

This attribution to men of greater classroom authority was contrasted against the emotional labour skills that women teachers were perceived to be better at. Again, the following exchanges are representative:

**Lyndsey:** *A lot of them still sort of have accidents, wet themselves and that, and I know there's sort of assistants and TAs [Teaching Assistants] and what have you to do that, but it is sort of the teacher's responsibility at the end of the day. So, maybe because of personal care, it's more sort of female teachers.*

**Emily:** *I don't know whether it's possibly because females, I don't know, with younger children ... like you said, you know, you've got the responsibility if they're crying, they're this, they're that, maybe a female can handle it a little better whereas higher up the school maybe you've got more cheekier children, the males can handle that a little bit better.*

(Focus Group Five)

The students' comments regarding men teachers' supposedly greater power of control in the classroom appear to be hinting strongly at the corporeal dimension of the gendered habitus. For Bourdieu (1990), the body is quite literally an embodied constituent of the habitus: our

posture, stance or way of walking are dispositions gained through early socialisation and carry social messages within particular fields. These messages are, above all, gendered ones in that they reproduce (or challenge) the dominant binary division between the 'assertive' male body and the 'submissive' female one (Bourdieu, 1990). In her study of teacher trainees, Braun (2011) similarly found a general perception of a commanding, physically authoritative teacher that was firmly sexed as male. To continue with the Bourdieusian analysis, from this it could be argued that the male body proffers a form of corporeal capital of symbolic value within the field of primary teaching which the female body does not. Certainly, government-led initiatives such as 'Troops to Teachers', with its emphasis upon the physicality and authority that (predominantly male) ex-armed forces personnel are held to bring to the classroom (Dermott, 2011), would strongly imply so. However, gender is a multi-dimensional construct that is mediated by factors such as age, class and ethnicity (Skelton, 2003). Furthermore, as Sayer (2005: 83) argues, the body itself is a 'wild card' in the competitions of the social field: while most bodies carry signs of a gendered social norm, there will be significant variations around 'the norm'. Thus, not all men will have access to or, indeed, wish to subscribe to hegemonic representations of maleness, and so not all men teachers will 'benefit' equally from their corporeal capital.

In other groups, the prevailing theme was that a male figure was particularly important for children who live in lone-mother households, as the male teacher fulfilled a kind of 'father' role:

*I think that young boys do need a male role model 'cos what happens, especially some boys whose parents are split up or don't see their fathers, and they don't have a male role model in their life. It can affect them with the nurturing side of things. ('Melanie': Focus Group Seven)*

*You get a lot of absent fathers but you don't get a lot of absent mothers. They instantly need that kind of male figure in their life*

*and if they don't have one at home they're going to look towards their male teacher and that male teacher will assume the role in the school of the father. So it's important for children in that respect that they have that person in their life. ('Robert': Focus Group Six)*

In previous research, which has examined what primary school principals understood to be the purpose of male 'role models', it was found that the single most cited response was to meet the needs of children in female-led, lone-parent households (Cushman, 2008: 130). As Cushman (2008: 130) argues, this 'compensatory theory' not only conflates and blurs the roles of teaching and parenting, it reinforces the assumption that schools are feminised institutions that require men teachers by way of redress. Following Fraser's (1995) framework, the students' comments about 'role models' indicate a shift from a claim for gender-neutral distributive justice (the best person for the job) to more of a recognition approach to gender. This shift appears to be based in a perception that any claims for gender-blind distributive justice need also to be tempered by an acceptance of apparent gender difference, that is, a belief that men teachers have certain 'qualities' or 'capacities' that women teachers do not. However, from a critical sociological viewpoint, while the students' comments are a form of recognition claim, it would be more accurate to say that they are a *misrecognition* claim. For Fraser (1999: 35), following Bourdieu, misrecognition is a form of 'status subordination' rooted in social relations and institutionalised patterns of domination rather than individual psychology. Thus, in making claims for the 'superior' capacities of men teachers in certain areas, both the female and male students are drawing upon wider gendered discourses that essentialise gender and which serve to subordinate women and thus impede them from achieving parity of participation (Fraser, 1995). As Fraser (1999: 35) argues, this is centrally a matter of justice and such patterns of subordination are morally indefensible, '*whether or not they distort the subjectivity of the oppressed*'

## **Concluding remarks**

This article has examined the perceptions of a sample of Education Studies undergraduates regarding possible accent and gender-related barriers to obtaining employment within primary teaching in the UK. The article has employed a three-part, ‘dual-systems’ (Anthias, 2005) theoretical framework, drawing upon the work of Sayer (2005), Fraser and Bourdieu. Following this model, the concepts of redistributive and recognitional justice have been applied as a means to understand the sort of justice claims the students have made in relation to perceived barriers. Fraser’s analytical division between economy and culture allows us to avoid collapsing the two different kinds of claims into one another and thereby losing what is distinctive about them. This perspectival dualism has been of clear relevance to this study. Thus, the students’ fears of likely employer prejudice related to their accents are a valid claim of injustice *regardless* of the possible distributive implications of such prejudice in terms of future employment opportunities. Similarly, this article has analysed the tensions between the students’ claims for gender-blind distributive justice in primary teacher recruitment and their more recognitional claims based around gendered concepts of males as ‘role models’. However, as Fraser (1999: 46-7) reminds us, redistributive claims will impinge upon recognitional claims and vice-versa, and this article has discussed the mutual imbrications of these claims in relation to issues of accent, gender and primary teaching employment opportunities.

On a final note, throughout the article I have emphasised that the focus of this study has been upon the students’ *perceptions* of likely employment-related prejudice as opposed to any actual *experiences* of it. It will be recalled that the Education Studies degree is not a teacher training qualification conferring Qualified Teacher Status (QTS); thus, although all of the students had expressed an intention to enter primary teaching, and many had applied for a QTS course, they were still at some distance from seeking employment within the sector. In

Bourdieuian terms, therefore, the study has asked the students to reflect upon their dispositions towards a field in which they are not yet (and, in some cases, may not be) actual 'players'. This qualification is important because, as previously noted, dispositions are always relational, being formed, at least in part, through the encounter between the individual's habitus and the relevant field; and, accordingly, it is acknowledged that the students' perceptions may well change with actual teaching experience.

Nonetheless, to continue with the Bourdieusian analysis, I would argue that on a wider level it is important to understand the exercise of 'practical sense' by which undergraduates may anticipate possible employment-related barriers, and the effects of this upon their sense of personal employability. Moreover, it is particularly important in relation to students such as the working-class, largely female participants of this study. Undergraduates have widely differing volumes and compositions of capital, and this affects their 'sense of place' within the fields of the labour market. There is now a growing body of evidence to suggest that working-class (under)graduates tend to operate from more limited spatial horizons in their search for employment than their middle-class peers (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Perryman et al. 2003; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). This tends to create lower expectations in terms of type of employment and of remuneration, particularly among working-class women (under)graduates (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005: 23; Perryman et al. 2003: 59). The reasons for this 'localism' are rooted in a complex of material, cultural and social factors, but there is some evidence that it can occur as a reaction to anticipated employer discrimination over issues such as accent or area of residence (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). For these reasons, the students' perceptions and associated claims for justice should be cause for concern. Although this research has focused upon primary teaching employment and the students' perceptions relate specifically to that field, not all the participants of this study will become primary teachers. Those who do not may ultimately, therefore, seek work across different

employment areas. If such students anticipate prejudice (however accurately) within other areas of the labour market, and if this has the effect of constraining their sense of employability, it will only further reproduce the classed and gendered divisions of the UK graduate labour market.

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**Acknowledgements:** I should like to thank the two anonymous referees whose comments have greatly improved this paper.

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Table 1 – Focus Groups

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Composition</b>
1	5 women
2	6 women
3	4 women and 1 man
4	6 women
5	6 women and 2 men
6	4 women and 1 man
7	6 women