

Social class: a ramp and a barrier to career aspirations, decision making & pathways



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NICEC Seminar

Kate Alexander and Dr Kyla Ellis

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Background



Ongoing IES research for the Construction Industry Training Board



Providing evidence for CITB to support the construction sector to meet skills and labour needs



Key themes: career decision making, CIAG, views and experiences of construction and aligned sectors

Social class research aims

- 1** Explore the influence of social class in career decision making, career aspirations and pathways
- 2** Explore the role of social class on decision making around careers in construction
- 3** Enable a class informed angle to CITB careers strategies

Method

- In-depth interviews with 30 stakeholders
 - 7 experts
 - 7 employers
 - 8 prospective entrants to construction
 - 8 recent entrants to construction
- Literature review
 - Mapping knowledge on the role of social class and career choices
 - Identifying examples of employer interventions in the construction sector focused on social class

Themes



Class and career decision making Social class shapes career aspirations and outcomes, directly and indirectly. But it is hard to define and hard for individuals to see.



Class and spheres of influence - Parents, school and personal preferences all influence career decisions, but these in turn are influenced by social class. CIAG offers opportunities to level the playing field.



Class and construction - Limited data on social class and construction. Anecdotal evidence suggests both a promise of social mobility and persistent stereotypes that construction is not 'aspirational'

Social class and career decision making

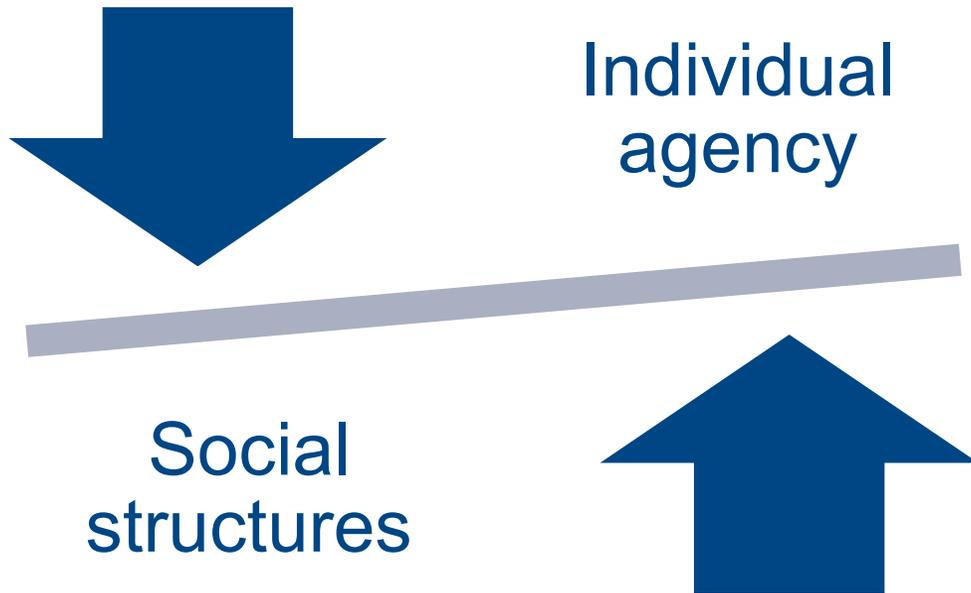


Social class and career decision making: theoretical underpinnings

- Academic literature makes a clear case that social class shapes career aspirations, decisions, and outcomes
- Particularly drawing on the work of Bourdieu within sociology of education literature
 - Habitus
 - Economic capital (assets and resources)
 - Social capital (who you know)
 - Cultural capital (what you know)



Structure and agency



“People make agentic decisions, shaped, and constrained, by their structural positions. While outcomes such as career paths are shaped by individual aspirations, these aspirations are in turn influenced and shaped by social structures, including social class.”



Intersectionality of class, race and gender

Class overlaps/intersects with race and gender in shaping experiences, attitudes and behaviours

From the literature:

- Ethnic capital
- Influence of gender
- Migration



Defining social class

- Definitions and concepts are subjective, inconsistent and complicated
 - Differing language and terms used
- Measure of class also inconsistent and can lead to different outcomes
 - Social class is not static (importance of 'roots')
 - Hard (deficit/hierarchical levels/metrics) vs soft (values)
 - Contradictory and exclusionary
 - Composite, nuanced and value-laden



Social class and career decision making

- Descriptions of social class were fluid and subjective
- For individuals', class was often not seen as important or considered an influencer
- Career decision making perceived to be a result of personal decisions and actions
- Class was not easily visible



*“I'm not too fussed about the class systems to be honest,
I just live my life, you know, just be grateful for what I get”*

(w/c 20 year old male)

*“Maybe an influence but not a major one...
It doesn't make it harder from my experience it doesn't affect me”*

(w/c 39 year old man)

“Having a social class which gives you adequate access to resources means that you can strive for more potential careers I'd say, I'm not sure that being an engineer is a particularly class driven education I think, less so for me but for others...I was always going to be an engineer, I don't think it would have mattered what class I was in... I don't think it would have been anything to do with class, for me for my current role it didn't affect it”

(m/c 24 year old male)



I went to my parents cap in hand. Basically said look, I want to go back to university and study to be an architect...and I was lucky enough for them to support me in that.

(m/c 47 year old male)

I don't want to, you know, bring up my kids in that same household per se, you know, in terms of finances. I think just by kind of seeing how that being lower class, growing up in lower class environments affected us as kids. I think me kind of not wanting to be there or to repeat such is kind of reason why I'm being pushed, or I feel the motivation inside to push and to increase my skill set and hence increase my pay.

(w/c 26 year old male)



Impact on confidence and sense of self

“I think subconsciously, I think there is fear there in terms of what I’m good at and definitely what I can apply for...I think that the social background definitely has influenced the role that I’m currently in, which is just a labourer, and, you know, a labourer is, I don’t know if you know a lot about construction, but they are almost like the bottom of the ladder, together with cleaners”

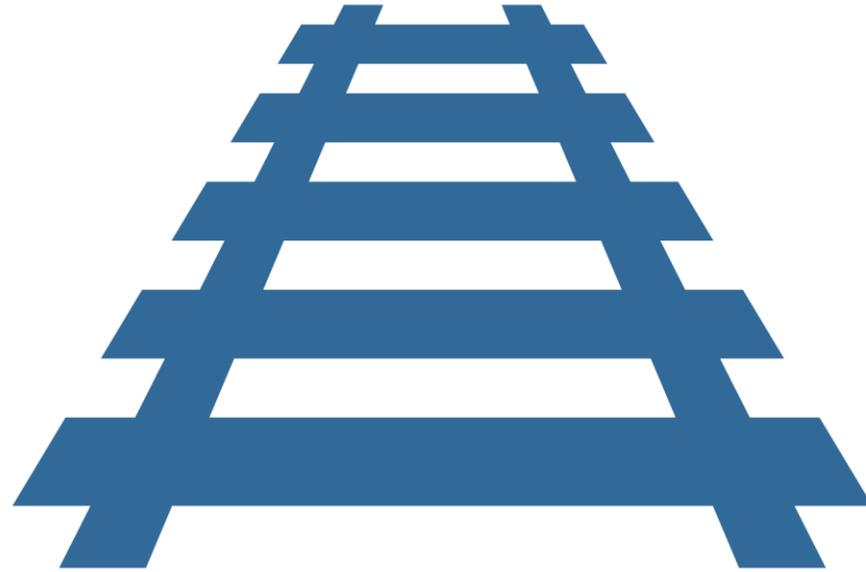
(w/c 26yr old male)

“Maybe I could have achieved or maybe gone for more if I felt more motivated to but kind of went for lower down jobs because I was working class. Like if I was middle class or upper class, I would be more willing to do university course or something”

(w/c 19yr old male)



Influences on aspirations, decisions and outcomes



Parental influences

- Parents shape the terrain and are tied up with other structural influences
- Strong(est) influence of parents/parental role models on choices and aspirations
 - Direct e.g. pushing, restricting
 - Indirect e.g. encouraging, shaping perspective of possibilities, being a role model
 - Perceived as honest and able to share 'real' experiences
- Parents can lack understanding/awareness and perpetuate misconceptions
- Family connections providing access to work experiences can be 'classed'
- Social class norms, prejudices and cultural expectations can be reinforced



Educators' influences

- Teachers, educators and school contexts are also influential
 - Influence subjects studied
 - Conduit to targeted career support
 - Shape possible pathways and aspirations
- However
 - Own perceptions can impact the guidance given
 - Lack of industry knowledge
 - A focus on academic ability and pathways



Influence of social norms

Although aspiration might mean different things to different people on an individual basis, at a societal level in the UK, a normative and socially acceptable reading of aspiration has become intrinsically linked with climbing a career ladder, and in tandem with that, gaining academic qualifications

- Leading to the persistent framing of Higher Education as a ‘golden pathway’
- Other pathways, including vocational routes, have historically been devalued
- A social push to support entry to university, but is it still generating outcomes?
- Construction framed as low aspiration despite its advantages and prospects
- Social norms shape expectations and experiences across classes



Role of gender and ethnicity

“Women have different skills. We might not be very technical, but actually my attention to detail is far better than a man's...I can also I make friends with the client and you know that kind of thing whereas you know my colleagues will be battling so whereas I can win the argument, but in a different way”

(w/c 41 year old female)

“I think women would be like, do you know what, let's get, you know, let's get mum, let's get Mummy [name] in. Because do you know what [name] is going to work Monday to Thursday, but on those four days that she's working, she will work hard. She'll be efficient and also women soften... Men behave better when there's women around. Generally, as a rule of experience...They shout at each other, but they never shout at me”

(w/c 44 year old female)



Influence of personal preferences

- Wide range of motivators/drivers within and across class backgrounds
 - what the work environment offers them
 - what the work itself offers them
 - where the work is
 - developing skills, increasing experiences and continuing to learn
- **teamwork, variety, autonomy, practical, social, travel, fulfilment**
- **flexibility, interest, challenge, developing relationships, progression, satisfaction, impact, respect, location, creativity, making a difference**
- Happiness, work connection and good work/life balance - consistent drivers
- Earnings secondary (means to financial stability, 'comfort')



Social class, CIAG and shaping aspirations

- Potential to level the playing field by offering equal access to
 - Knowledge of different routes
 - Social connections
 - Cultural capital
- Particularly important for those from working class backgrounds
 - Less access to 'hot' information
 - Reflected in interventions to reach working class young people
- Potential for CIAG approaches that foreground social class?

Discussion

Thoughts/reflections/questions?

How do findings reflect your experiences of the impact of social class on aspirations, decisions and outcomes?

How do you work with/against classed based influences in your practice?

How can individuals be supported to find the right role for them regardless of class background?

Social class and construction



Construction context

Persistent skills and labour shortages

Variety of roles, entry routes and career pathways:

- Skilled trades
- Entry level manual work
- Technical and professional roles
- Apprenticeships
- Graduate roles

Prevalence of self-employment and subcontracting

Opportunities to fulfil a variety of career aspirations

Challenges around understanding and navigating the industry



Class composition of construction

- No solid evidence
 - challenges measuring DEI, especially social class
 - employment arrangements and employer resourcing
- Strong assumptions and stereotypes
 - Construction for non-academic/practically-minded/less ambitious
 - On-site roles and working class masculinity
 - Office roles and middle class graduates
 - Different routes in – university vs OTJ/apprenticeships
- Stereotypes persist, act as barrier to and devalue (the range of) construction careers



Social mobility in construction

- Workers and employers feel construction offers good prospects for social mobility
- Social mobility enabled by meritocratic entry, good pay and progression
- Offers opportunities for people from any class background to find fulfilling work – variety of roles
- Use of social value to support ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘underrepresented groups’
- But again, a lack of evidence



Class barriers

- Apprenticeship wages
- Competition for degree apprenticeships
- Importance of social connections for knowledge and entry
- Poor knowledge of vocational routes/HE as a 'golden pathway'
- Persistent stereotypes

Can people find the right role for them regardless of class background?



Social class as a ramp or a barrier

- Early career decisions of young people influenced by
 - people around you and what they do
 - roles you see where you grow up
 - local accessible opportunities and resources
 - (classed) assumptions of others
 - engagement in careers activities
 - (lack of) confidence
 - In this way class can limit potential career aspirations and possibilities in short- and long-term
 - And make some careers easier to follow than others
- ➔ What is possible

Discussion

Thoughts/reflections/questions

- How do these findings compare to other sectors?
- Is anything specific to construction?
- Do any other sectors have better information on class composition?
- Are class ramps and barriers similar/different to other sectors?

Relevant IES publications

- Social class and construction research forthcoming – Feb/March 2026!
- Careers in Construction research 2025 – a focus on early career related learning, vocational learners and economically inactive adults
- Moving out to move on – Research for the Social Mobility Commission investigating the link between internal migration, disadvantage and social mobility
- Deliveroo Strikes blog – Exploring the sharp end of insecure work and the importance of collective action



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