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## **Poachers and gamekeepers: processes of class-based organizational closure and usurpation in Sri Lanka's emerging private sector**

*In a qualitative study based on 25 interviews, we examine highly skilled workers' accounts of class-based closure in emerging occupational sectors in Sri Lanka. Our findings reveal holes in the entrance criteria firms demanded to secure their elite status. Highlighting how individuals who were excluded at junior levels negotiate entry at mid/senior levels we show how 'poachers turn into gamekeepers' illuminating the dialectical relationship between exclusion and inclusionary usurpation. We contextualise organisational closure, highlighting the influence of wider societal effects on the process.*

**Keywords:** class, closure, career, recruitment and selection

### **Introduction**

This article examines class-based closure in emerging occupational sectors in Sri Lanka: a sector serving the global market and aiming to do things in 'modern' ways. A plethora of studies highlights how in their recruitment practices well-established occupations such as law and accountancy target individuals who have graduated from prestigious universities and/or possess desirable accents, confidence and dress codes (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Jacob, 2003; Empson and Ashley, 2013). Favouring privileged social classes, such criteria are an obstacle to social mobility. However we know very little about how processes of class-related closure work outside of these established sectors or in less economically developed countries. Furthermore, although studies have addressed peoples' responses to gendered and racial barriers (see Tomlinson et al. 2013), limited attention has been paid to how individuals respond to class-based obstacles. Addressing highly skilled workers'

accounts of class-based closure in three leading organizations, operating in the new and rapidly growing information technology and financial services sectors in Sri Lanka, we address these significant empirical and theoretical gaps.

We define leading Sri Lankan firms as those which have high profit margins and renowned brand names (see Hartmaan, 2000), and which distinguish themselves as prestigious in terms of the cultural, social and symbolic capital of their workforce. With generous remuneration packages, opportunities for career development, attention to work-life balance and, above all, their identification with the West these firms are seen as desirable graduate destinations. In what follows we will first address the literature on class-based closure highlighting theoretical and empirical gaps in the current picture, and then provide details of our methodology. Next we will introduce the Sri Lankan context to set the scene for our study. Our findings lead to three key contributions. First, we show how class-based exclusion works in emerging occupational sectors in Sri Lanka. Second, we contextualise organisational closure, emphasising the importance of understanding the process in relation to the wider context in which the organisation is situated (see Maurice et al. 1980). Third, we highlight how 'poachers turn into game keepers' illuminating the dialectical relationship between inclusionary usurpation and exclusion.

### **Class-based closure**

Closure refers to 'a process of subordination whereby one group monopolises advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it defines as inferior and ineligible' (Murphy 1988:8). Closure can be based on any group attribute such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion and/or social class. The term was first coined to explain

the way class was used to draw boundaries between groups, effectively to include certain desirable groups, and to exclude the rest (see Weber et al. 1946). It is a powerful process with significant implications for social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2009).

Frank Parkin (1972; 1979) and Raymond Murphy (1988) were at the forefront of developments in Max Weber's original idea of closure. Parkin (1979) distinguished between exclusion and usurpation. Exclusion involves the downward exercise of power in a process of subordination as social groups seek to secure, maintain or enhance privileged access to rewards and opportunities. Usurpation is defined as the actions on the part of subordinated groups which involves the countervailing use of power in an upward direction (Parkin, 1979), aimed at reducing the share of resources claimed by dominant groups. While it might not involve removing the dominant from their position (as we typically understand the term), it may reduce their share of resources. Murphy (1984) further developed Parkin's work by distinguishing between different forms of usurpation. Inclusionary usurpation is the struggle by excluded groups to become included as incumbents (Murphy, 1984: 560). This might involve individual members of excluded groups attempting to acquire the resources dominant groups use as a basis of exclusion, and therefore wriggle their way into the dominant groups' territory based on their newly acquired resources reducing these groups' claims to exclusive access. Ross (1999) shows how black women attempt to circumvent ethnicity-based barriers to managerial positions in organisations which limit their access to sponsored education and training courses by funding these courses themselves. On the back of these qualifications they are then able to secure those previously unavailable positions. Revolutionary usurpation is, in contrast, a direct attempt to disturb the status quo and challenge to its exclusivity (Murphy, 1988). Demands for equal rights and the abolition of

special privileges through non-violent means such as marches are classic examples. Exclusion and usurpation in combination lead to on-going conflict between 'poachers' and 'gamekeepers', as the former struggle to sneak in and the latter attempt to keep out unwanted others.

The concept of exclusionary closure has been used to examine class-based barriers in well-established occupations (Bourdieu, 1996; Hartman, 2000). For instance, studies into accountancy and law report the selection of graduates from elite universities to ensure social exclusivity (Rolfe and Anderson, 2003; Cooke et al. 2012; Empson and Ashley, 2013). In work settings credentials are often taken as a proxy for candidates' talent and ability. However, having a degree from a renowned university is not only a matter of intelligence and performance, but also a consequence of resources such as high quality secondary education (Archer et al. 2007). The use of educational credentials as a prerequisite for entry to corporations thus excludes students from less privileged backgrounds and consolidates the position of the upper classes (Bourdieu, 1996). According Empson and Ashley (2013), in situations where it is difficult for clients to assess an organisation's technical expertise, having employees with prestigious credentials sends a signal of quality and expertise. In other words, selective recruitment based on credentials is used symbolically by organisations as a mechanism for enhancing and consolidating their reputation.

Intangible elements such as speech (Bourdieu, 1984) and lifestyle also work to ensure social class exclusivity. Empson (2001) found that in the UK consultancy sector, applicants are judged on the basis of their verbal competencies and mannerisms (see also Alvesson and Robertson, 2006) while Cooke and colleagues (2012) highlight how UK law firms evaluate

potential recruits' comportment and social skills through assessment centres, interviews and informal interactions with junior lawyers (see also Sommerlad, 2007; Empson and Ashley, 2013). They also point to firms' recruitment literature which includes photographs of employees casually sipping champagne, omitting people whose images might not fit in with the lifestyles they are seeking to depict. Significantly, Empson and Ashley (2013) argue that the focus on soft skills in recruitment varies according to the nature of the work. Their research into law firms found that verbal dexterity and confidence were prioritised in areas such as corporate finance that which required extensive interaction with high value, demanding clients. Likewise Cooke et al (2012) found that embodied cultural capital is often treated as a sign of fit with clients. Thus recruits with social acumen and certain kinds of lifestyles provide clients with a sense of familiarity and safety, enhancing the perceived authority and solidity of the 'brand'.

Social capital also serves as means of exclusion in elite organisations, a point highlighted not only in the academic literature, but also in the press. In an article in the *New York Times*, Schwartz (2013) writes that big companies are increasingly using their own workers to find new hires, saving time and money but lengthening the odds for job seekers without such networks. Furthermore, if called for interview, personally known applicants are more likely to be hired (Castilla, 2005). They are seen as performing better, staying longer and integrating into work teams more easily because existing employees tend to refer people who are like them (Burke et al. 2013). Socially privileged individuals who have attended elite universities are most likely to have connections to existing employees in top firms and thus be recommended for jobs. Firms do not explicitly exclude applicants on the basis of limited economic capital. However, because economic, social and cultural capital are inextricably

linked, in preferring those with certain social and cultural resources organisations inadvertently bar people from more modest backgrounds.

The above studies highlight how screening mechanisms in established occupations favour privileged individuals. However, they pay scanty attention to how those subject to exclusion respond to being closed out, or how through processes of inclusionary usurpation (Parkin, 1979) they seek to improve their positions (see Ross, 1999). An exception is Sommerlad (2007) whose findings show how law students who were not from upper class backgrounds adopted cultural attributes such as accents in order to blend into prestigious firms. Although she did not conceptualise it as such, this could be seen as a rare empirical example of inclusionary usurpation (Murphy, 1984). While Sommerlad raises questions about how people craft their careers in the light of class-based entry barriers, there is a lot more work to do. We need studies which investigate not only people's accounts of class-based exclusionary processes but also how they respond to these barriers and with what implications.

Most importantly, a limitation in this literature is its tendency to consider organizational closure as distinct from the wider society processes depicting it as a 'culture-free' process. Here Maurice et al.'s (1980) work on 'societal effects' is useful. They argue that organizational processes of differentiation and integration can be seen to consistently interact with wider societal institutions, leading to nationally distinct features within organizations. Empirically, such effects are vividly illustrated in Maurice's (1978) research into French and German organizations. They explain that while in French firms a large proportion of top management is from the elite Grands Ecoles, in Germany such positions



are also available to engineers and technicians without such distinct educational credentials. The scholars attribute these distinctive features to the countries' particular educational systems. In France technical education has traditionally been devalued. In contrast, in Germany apprenticeship schemes enjoy much higher status, forming the backbone of professional training in handicrafts, industry, and commerce. The 'societal effects' approach has been criticized for overemphasizing differences between societies and connoting internal coherence in national systems (Rubery, 1988) which can lead to a static and overly simplistic view. However it does allow us to move beyond culturalist approaches which tend to reduce differences to an ill-defined set of cultural values (Daune-Richard, 1998). Applying the ideas of societal effects to Murphy's (1984) work on class-based closure, we might attempt to understand exclusion and usurpation in relation to the contextual conditions within which particular organizations are situated.

Finally we know very little about class related closure in emerging occupational sectors and in less economically developed countries. Such insights are important not only in assessing the applicability of existing understandings, but also in revealing aspects of social closure which have thus far remained unexamined. In this article we address these empirical and conceptual lacunae through a study of highly skilled workers' accounts of social closure in rapidly developing sectors in Sri Lanka: information technology and financial services. Both sectors have been experiencing huge growth significantly influenced by processes of globalization; with attractive pay packages and significant symbolic value, they are seen as offering promise of career success and social mobility to aspirational Sri Lankans.

## Research design

This study is based on twenty five semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author with four junior managers, twelve middle managers and nine senior managers in three leading organisations operating in emerging IT and Financial services sectors. Two firms were prestigious information technology solutions providers which also offered IT infrastructure and consulting services to foreign clients. One firm was a Colombo-based branch of a renowned multinational company while the other was a local company recently acquired by the London stock exchange group. The third organisation was a global financial services firm based in Colombo serving high profile, foreign clients. Like the IT firms, this organisation boasted a highly desirable work environment with flexible working options, after-hours events and an abundance of opportunities for development. Furthermore, their substantial remuneration packages and links to the West made them desirable employment destinations. The selected organisations were similar to each other in terms of the way they positioned themselves to prospective employees and the general public (as modern western-influenced organisations) and the 'elite forms' of cultural, social and symbolic capital they demanded from their recruits. In this paper, we follow Bourdieu (1986; 1990) and define class in terms of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (see Atkinson, 2010). Capitals are resources valuable within the field in which individuals are situated. Economic capital is convertible into money and includes financial resources and property. Social capital is based on social connections and/or group affiliations (Mayrhofer et al. 2004). Cultural capital is of three forms: embodied capital such as mannerisms, dress codes and mastery of language refers to properties of one's self that are both acquired and inherited from the family through socialization (Bourdieu, 1990); objectified cultural capital consists of physical objects that are owned; and institutionalized cultural capital includes

credentials or titles (Bourdieu, 1986). Finally symbolic capital refers to one or more of these basic forms of capital which are socially recognised as legitimate. For each stock of capital there corresponds a set of movements around the social space that a person perceives as probable (Atkinson, 2010). Our intention is not to classify respondents into particular social classes based on the capitals they possess, but rather to draw on Bourdieu's ideas of capital to highlight 'classed' nature of prevailing recruitment criteria which had the effect of excluding people who were perceived to *not* possess desired forms of capital.

All of our respondents' firms required an excellent command of English language and foreign credentials from their new junior recruits. However during the first three interviews it became obvious that all employees did not fulfil the traditional criteria. We therefore decided to include equal numbers of employees who did and did not satisfy expectations. We took the view that this would enable us to better understand how class-based closure processes operated in these sectors, and especially how those who did not satisfy traditional criteria managed to break in. Fourteen respondents were men while eleven were women. Nine were from the financial services firm while eight were from IT firm 1 and eight from IT firm 2. Sixty per cent of respondents from the financial services firm and fifty per cent of participants from each of the IT firms were senior managers. All participants were qualified to graduate level or above. Twenty three were Sinhalese Buddhists while two were Tamil. Our sample is over-represented by Sinhalese respondents and we acknowledge this as a limitation of the research design.

Insert table 1

Respondents were recruited through a snowballing sampling method (Heckathorn, 1997). In one-to-one interviews they were asked about the entry criteria for junior, middle and senior management posts and why these are important. They were also asked to describe the recruitment and selection processes in their organisations, including questions asked at interviews. Participants discussed their own recruitment experiences, highlighting how they and their peers enacted their careers in the light of prevailing class related screening mechanisms. Examples of questions asked included (a) what are the entry criteria for a graduate management trainee post? (b) Do all employees fulfil these criteria? (c) Did you fulfil these criteria? If not, how did you manage to get in? When respondents talked about issues such as foreign experience, we specifically asked them why this was perceived as important. In addition to interviews, we analysed job adverts and marketing brochures of our respondents' organisations.

Twenty-four interviews were digitally recorded while one was note recorded at the respondent's request. The key themes were identified during the data collection itself since data collection and analysis were undertaken in parallel (Silverman, 2009). The main technique used to analyse the data was template analysis (King, 2004). We first developed a list of first order codes (or template) representing the key empirical themes (e.g. education, family background, social connections). These themes, likewise reflected in interview guide, were informed by the literature reviewed and the first author's personal experience of the Sri Lankan context. We also developed codes on the basis of themes raised by interviewees.

For example, almost all of our respondents' highlighted foreign experience and excellent analytical skills as the most sought after skill sets in their work contexts. These empirically grounded themes became central to the analysis. The analysis was undertaken by both

authors. To ensure reliability, codes were cross referenced for internal consistency between transcripts and between coders. Once the initial template was constructed, we worked systematically through the transcripts assigning sections of data texts to one or more

appropriate codes. The Nvivo 9 software package was used to facilitate data coding and to establish frequencies pertaining to themes. Coded data were compared for consistent usage and relevance to extant research throughout the process of analysis.

Hammersley and Atkinson's (1997) notion of 'progressive focusing' describes the process we followed where empirical codes were loosely described in the beginning but became specific as the analysis progressed. First order themes were grouped into broader, second order conceptual codes (e.g. holes in recruitment practices, policing), using the same process as above to ensure reliability within the dataset and between coders. We also examined all data texts which were not associated with a code and looked out for contrasting and minority views in our data to ensure that our analysis was based on all respondents' voices. We re-read the contents of each code to develop our understanding of each at an individual level, as well as the relationships and associations between them and the 'big picture'.

### **The Sri Lankan context**

Sri-Lanka is an economically developing, multi-ethnic country with a population of about 20 million people. The population density is highest in the capital, Colombo. The largest ethnic group is the 'Sinhalese' while minority groups include Tamils, Muslims and Burghers (descendants of former European colonizers) (Wilhelm, 1912). Sri Lanka became an English crown colony in 1815. Before colonization social class in Sri Lanka was based on the ancient

caste system. Amongst the Sinhalese, 'Govigama' (a farmer caste) was dominant due to owning land. With colonial rule, wealth was no longer coincident with caste lines. Michael

Roberts (2002) notes how the plantation industry established by the British created opportunities for indigenous entrepreneurs in a broad sector of service industries and operations. The less dominant Sinhalese castes were influenced by this emerging order, leaving their traditional occupations to accumulate wealth and influence during the colonial period (Jayawardena, 2002). Roberts (2002) highlights how a less dominant caste, Karawe, was poised to fill the new roles. In many ways these were similar to the traditional occupations they had been performing or at least necessitated only slight lateral movement.

Roberts argues that this upward economic mobility created a gulf between economic position and social status in the Sinhalese caste structure. Ethnic minorities also benefited from colonization. The British pre-independence support of Christianity and the English language led to the powerful state sector being dominated by English-educated Christian Tamils and Burghers as well as Sinhalese Christians (Sowell, 2004). However, only a very small minority of the population comprised local elites (Wenzlhuemer, 2008).

In 1948 the country was granted its independence. The rise of Sinhalese nationalism and the marginalization of Tamils followed. The Sinhala Only Act passed in the Parliament in 1956 made Sinhalese the official language of the country. Furthermore, the government introduced a standardization policy which made university admission criteria lower for Sinhalese than for Tamils as there was an overrepresentation of Tamil students in higher education institutions. At that time, Tamil made up 48% and 49% of the student population in Engineering and Science faculties (Sowell, 2004). In 1983, the most gruesome ethnic riots erupted leading to the deaths of thousands of Tamils in Colombo at the hands of organised

Sinhalese extremist gangs. The mob violence began as a reaction to the ambush of a Sri Lankan Army patrol in Jaffna (home to the Tamil majority), which killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers (Dharmawardane, 2013). All this led to a three-decade long conflict between the Sri Lankan government and a Tamil rebel group known as the LTTE. The war was brought to an end on 18 May 2009. Currently reconciliation efforts are taking place which includes a tri-language educational policy, rehabilitation and reintegration of former LTTE combatants and the rebuilding of the conflict-affected Tamil communities of the Northern and Eastern Provinces (Dharmawardane, 2013). Vocational rehabilitation involves skills development for a range of industries including beauty culture, garment and textiles and information technology. Several Sri Lankan blue chip companies have supported these vocational training initiatives by helping to develop the vocational skills of former combatants, providing them with employment upon completion of the program (Dharmawardane, 2013).

Despite the long civil war, economic growth in Sri Lanka has averaged around 4.5%. However like its closest neighbor, India, the country is still characterized by significant socioeconomic divisions (Adya, 2008). Sri Lanka opened up its economy in 1977 attracting foreign investors into the labour intensive garments sector and this led to the establishment of a dynamic export industry linked to international supply networks (Athukorala and Jayasuriya, 2012). The tourism sector also started to boom, and Sri Lanka set to establish itself as a prime tourist destination. With the gradual erosion of the dominant role of state-owned enterprises (SOE), the private sector was largely responsible for the country's economic dynamism. The export-oriented manufacturing sector which emerged in the beginning of the new era is a major generator of employment opportunities in the economy, accounting for over a half of total employment growth during the 1980s and 1990s (Athukorala and

Jayasuriya, 2012). As in India, there is a newly emerging business process outsourcing industry, and information technology companies proliferate (Central bank of Sri Lanka, 2013). During the last decade, foreign investors have established ventures in Sri Lanka enticed by low production costs, high skill sets and good command of English Language. Employment in these new sectors is seen as desirable because of high pay structures with western-influenced work cultures (Authors, 2013).

Sri Lanka boasts high literacy rates; 92.8% of males and 90% of females were identified as literate in the 2009 Labour Force Survey. Sri Lanka's policy of free education and network of over 9000 state schools contributes to its high literacy rates. Higher education in Sri Lanka is free, but also limited. For example, only 16.5% of students qualified for entrance gain admission to the fourteen state Universities (Central bank of Sri Lanka, 2008). The majority of students enroll at autonomous degree awarding institutes and/or study for professional examinations in Accountancy or Computing from the UK such as CIMA, BCS, and ACCA. As a result Sri Lanka has one of the largest pools of professionally qualified accountants in South Asia. More affluent Sri Lankans enroll their children at franchise foreign universities based in Colombo or send them abroad, mainly to Anglophone countries. Building on the country's high literacy rates and skill sets, the present government hopes to make Sri Lanka a global knowledge hub (Hirimburegama, 2012).

#### Class-based closure in Sri Lanka's emerging private sector

The limited available literature depicts leading private employers in Sri Lanka as placing value on potential recruits' command of English, manners and interpersonal skills (Winslow and Woost, 2004; Hettige, 1995; Gunawardena et al. 1991). Most private sector



corporations conduct their business transactions in English and are therefore reluctant to employ monolingual educated rural youth, even if they have the right qualifications (Winslow and Woost, 2004). Young people from rural areas are seen as having insufficient English language skills and as lacking in the cosmopolitan perspective which are essential to fit into a modern business or office environment. Therefore private sector employers deliberately target urban educated middle-class candidates even if they are less successful academically (Winslow and Woost, 2004). By contrast, whatever their academic acumen, rural youth are typically employed in semi-skilled blue collar jobs in the burgeoning private sector especially in the garment industry. Thus it is notable that while this expanding sector is providing new opportunities for all, it is maintaining wider social inequalities in the country through its recruitment practices for white collar jobs.

In contrast to leading organisations in the West, researchers (Sparrow and Budhwar, 1996; Winslow and Woost, 2004; Saher et al., 2011) have reported that private sector organizations in the Indian sub-continent often operate informal recruitment practices, based on social contacts. Although positions are advertised, they are generally made available to close acquaintances of existing senior employees or to candidates with influential connections. This feature of recruitment advantages the privileged classes who are most likely to have such contacts. As in the West, elite organisations in South Asia are also seen to target employees from prestigious universities in the country (see Kaur, 2013; Limaye, 2012). However the literature provides few explanations for firms engaging in such explicit screening mechanisms and do not consider individuals' responses.

In sum, class-based entry barriers in Sri Lankan organisations appear more explicit than those in the West and some private sector firms are transparent in their social targeting. The practice of recruiting through social networks (ensures that prevailing selection processes privilege the upper classes. To our knowledge there is no formal legislation in the country which addresses class-based discrimination. Furthermore, despite significant social disparities in the population, little attention has been paid to social class exclusivity in emerging occupational sectors which, paradoxically, are seen to offer Sri Lankan youth the greatest promise of social mobility. Given these conditions, Sri Lanka is an important context in which to examine the following questions:

- a. How do highly skilled Sri Lankan workers account for class-based barriers in leading firms in the emerging IT and financial services sectors?
- b. How do they respond to perceived hurdles and with what implications?

We are particularly interested in the recursive relationship between class-based recruitment and selection structures, and individual agency.

## **Findings**

In this section we present respondents' accounts of the recruitment requirements imposed by some of Sri Lanka's leading organisations. While individuals highlighted exclusive class-based entry criteria, it soon became apparent that the system was not watertight. Rather our respondents also highlighted inconsistencies and gaps in recruitment criteria. These 'holes', while not immediately apparent or even formally recognised, provided spaces for people to manoeuvre. In what follows we examine how respondents enacted their careers

in the light of these fluid requirements and consider implications for exclusionary mechanisms.

#### Entering the professional cadre at junior levels: individuals' accounts of exclusion

As in elite organisations in the West (Empson and Ashley, 2013) and in Asia (Kaur, 2013), all 25 respondents agreed that an honours degree from a renowned university is essential to secure a management trainee post – a requirement explicitly stated in recruitment advertisements. Anil who works as a head of finance for a leading financial services company explains:

*From a graduate trainee we expect a foreign degree –there is a preference for UK, US and Australian degrees in our organisation – especially for UK degrees. I can't exactly spell out to you how exactly a British degree is better than an Australian degree but a lot people believe that it is. And everybody knows that the local university system is declining – graduates don't have soft skills and struggle to think out of the box. In our organisation we have a number of senior employees from schools like LSE and UCL*

Anil highlights the value placed on degrees from the West, as opposed to credentials from equivalently ranked educational institutions in Asia. In contrast to local universities, foreign programs were seen as training graduates in soft skills such as presentation techniques, teamwork and leadership. Indeed 19 out of 25 respondents mentioned that the quality of the Sri Lankan university system is declining, providing a highly theoretical and rather outdated education. Furthermore, the emergence of a large number of new foreign franchise degree programs in Colombo means that firms were not short of potential graduate management recruits. Among western countries, qualifications from the UK were

accorded the highest status. While doors were specifically open to graduates from renowned schools like the London School of Economics, these firms also targeted candidates who have pursued British degree programs on local campuses in Sri Lanka. Given that tuition fees of British franchise degree programs are extremely high and (for those who pursue their studies in the UK) room and board is amongst the most expensive in the world, management trainee positions are realistically only available to children of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

Twenty-one respondents (from both IT and financial services), reported that asking about candidates' family backgrounds and social connections is common practice in recruitment interviews:

*And yes we ask a bit about the family background – very generally who the parents are – most of the time someone in the company tends to know them – Colombo is not a very big place. Hiring a known person is more reliable – it is a form of trust and reassurance that the candidate is credible (Swasha)*

Although jobs are advertised in the mass media, selection is influenced by connections to existing employees. In Sri Lanka a recruit's trustworthiness is linked to her social capital. The prevailing ideology in South Asia is that a well-known person is most likely to demonstrate loyalty to the organisation (Saher, 2011), reflecting the dominant collectivist culture. While we do not subscribe to this essentialist explanation, our data did reveal that established schemas of thinking and practice advantaged upper class people who are most likely to have such connections.

Another entry requirement is fluent English (Winslow and Woost, 2004). Hulanka, head of a leading IT firm explains:

*An excellent command of English Language is a must for a management trainee position here – like any other leading company. We operate in a global market after all.*

While high level English language skills can be seen as a practical requirement for positions which involved significant interaction with high profile foreign clients, three line managers from IT and financial services argued that a good command of English is necessary even for posts that require little client contact. Thus there seemed to be a symbolic element to this requirement in postcolonial Sri Lanka where class is tied to proficiency in English (Jayawardena, 2002).

The final requirement is a 'good personality' which respondents described vaguely in terms of outgoingness and the ability to 'get on' with existing employees (Cooke et al. 2012). This imperative was more prevalent in the accounts of respondents from financial services than from information technology. Six respondents explained that interpersonal traits were assessed through a candidate's ability to develop rapport with others in the course of the recruitment process. Significantly, the importance of fitting in was emphasised in some organisations' marketing brochures which included testimonies of existing employees, clearly highlighting the universities and schools they attended and leisure activities they enjoy. When asked about this, most respondents could not explain the rationale behind these images, but said they felt most comfortable with candidates with similar educational backgrounds because it meant they had a lot in common.

### Holes in recruitment criteria

While our data revealed consistency in the attributes organizations looked for in junior recruits, when it came to middle and senior level appointments the scene was more dynamic. As firms operated in an increasingly competitive global environment, all senior and middle managers in both sectors explained that there is an urgent need for specialist analytical skills which are scarce in the Sri Lankan labour market. Nuwan highlighted these requirements in his large IT firm:

*We are now needing very specialised skills, people who could write extraordinary programs, make very specific models. Doing wonders and satisfying clients' extraordinary needs seems to be the only way we can play in this market. But there aren't many such people out there - people may have fancy degrees but not all of them have those cutting edge skills. Some of these skills can't be taught you know – you have to acquire them – be creative. Sometimes we see these skills in people who have worked for some time, done a professional qualification and tried to apply what they learnt. Anyway when we come across these exceptional individuals we grab them*

Nuwan draws a distinction between holding a degree from a foreign university (a significant criterion for securing a trainee post) and having specialist analytical skills. He implies that having the former does not necessarily mean that one has the latter. Rather, these more specialist skills are seen to be acquired *only* through professional qualifications and relevant work experience. Because such skills are seen as essential, Nuwan's firm was willing to

employ individuals who have taken unconventional routes - in other words, who did not have a high status, foreign degree. In this sense he identifies a significant structural hole in the recruitment system.

Recognising this hole, four people who did not meet traditional entry requirements but had other valued assets identified a way in. Kalana explains his appointment as a senior financial analyst in a leading global financial services firm:

*I think I was one of the fewest people in the country to hold the CFA qualification when I was recruited. Although I worked for small IT firms before I came here -doing both IT and finance – I did some good work – I had identifiable outputs in terms of models that I could sell to other companies – models which save cost which companies need to survive these days (Kalana, 41)*

Kalana highlights how he acquired a higher position (Murphy, 1988) by using an alternative form of institutionalised cultural capital (CFA qualification) and valued expertise, both of which had a symbolic value to his elite organisation. As an agentic response to being closed out, we see it as a form of inclusionary usurpation. Furthermore by wriggling his way into a previously closed territory based on his newly acquired resources, Kalana reduced original incumbents' claims to exclusive access: a key effect of usurpation. Three other respondents described their appointments in similar terms, explaining how overtaking more conventionally-qualified peers in this way was quite rare, available only to those candidates with exceptional, highly sought-after skill sets.

In addition to professional credentials, overseas work experience in reputed firms was likewise becoming an increasingly desirable form of 'career capital' (Mayrhofer et al. 2004), attractive because of its practical relevance and symbolic value (Doherty and Dickmann, 2009). In Indika's words:

*Working abroad in UK or Australia gives you a lot skills – you learn to work in an ambiguous environment, make better decisions, plan minutely. I am talking about working for a leading company of course. In the kind of work we do – doing analysis for foreign clients- I think these skills are extremely useful. And of course clients are also happy to have people who have some foreign exposure. So yes, we are always open for people who have worked abroad. Well yes, I think we are particularly partial towards the UK – but that is the way with everything in our country from education to everything else.*

Indika and seven others said that their organisations were willing to accept international experience over and above the more traditional requirement for a foreign degree, because it was seen as equipping individuals with skills that were essential to compete in a global marketplace. The fact that the UK was singled out could be linked to Sri Lanka's post-colonial legacy, or it could be the result of the much more pragmatic fact that the firm Indika worked for served a number of British clients.

Nevertheless in the light of this hole in the recruitment criteria, well-educated people who did not possess foreign degrees or other established forms of embodied cultural capital acquired work experience in well-known organisations in the West. Seven respondents completed British professional qualifications in Sri Lanka such as CIMA and used these



capitals to obtain professional jobs in countries such as UK and Australia through highly skilled migrant schemes. While excluded from graduate-level positions, they were able to break into private firms at a later stage in their careers. Kavya described the process:

*As soon as I finished my A'levels I did three parts of CIMA and applied for a 2 year work visa to the UK which they used to give out very readily those days. I had about 2 years of working experience in a very small audit firm – this experience was not significant enough for the big firms in Sri Lanka but in England I got an assistant accountant post as a temp in a FTSE 250. I was there for 5 years – I left as senior analyst. I secured a job here (her current workplace) even before I set a foot back in the country because where I was coming from was very significant.*

Like Kavya, six of our other respondents had overcome entry barriers at a later stage of their career upon acquiring international experience. Illustrating the 'struggle by excluded groups to become included as incumbents' (ibid 1984-560), this too can be seen as a form of inclusionary usurpation (Murphy, 1984).

Because in Sri Lanka highly privileged individuals have not traditionally needed to migrate to other countries to improve their economic chances, they are unlikely to possess the valued international work experience that private firms now seek in their new recruits. This leaves a hole that well-qualified people who lack traditional resources are able to fill. While we recognise that our respondents' decision repatriate could be influenced by factors other than career mobility, our data suggest that the knowledge that they *could* secure attractive

employment in these high status sectors significantly influenced this decision, providing them with a sense of financial security to return to an economy with poor state support.

Vinodh who migrated to Australia for eight years explained that his tenure abroad not only enabled him to gain experience and enhance his economic capital through a high salary, but also helped him improve his command of English and other forms of embodied cultural capital sought after by Sri Lanka's new, westernized firms. This example illustrates not only how institutionalised cultural capital (professional qualifications) can be used to obtain embodied forms of cultural capital (proficiency in English) (Postone et al. 1993) but also its central role in usurpation:

*My years in Melbourne was the best years of my life –through my ACS qualification I got a job in a leading IT firm, earned very good money and also improved my pronunciation, dress sense, confidence. I am not ashamed to say that I didn't have the polish I have now before I went abroad. I was offered jobs in several leading organisations in Sri Lanka upon my return (Vinodh, 38)*

Overall these extracts highlight the permeability of class-based boundaries in emerging occupational sectors in Sri Lanka. At higher levels, Sri Lankan organisations emphasised work-related skills, arguably inevitable in the light of intense global competition. Furthermore in a small economically developing country, organisations are impacted by skill shortages in the labour market which means that they cannot afford to be exclusive in their recruitment to fields such as engineering.

## Policing

Respondents who managed to gain entry appeared to completely change their stance once they got in, fully embracing the positions that had excluded them. In Diluni's words:

*I would chose a foreign graduate over a local any day, not because I am prejudiced - but because their knowledge is more current and they have been trained to do project work, work in teams etc. as part of their course .. I think this is essential to survive in the modern corporate world (Diluni, 41)*

Having overcome the entry barriers, Diluni did not attempt to make the path easier for others like her. She refused to accept that soft skills can be learned on the job and in spite of her own experience, clung to the view that such attributes could only be acquired in a western university. Three other respondents who were disadvantaged by prevailing recruitment practices had similarly internalised the ideologies underlying these practices (Swingewood, 2000) and talked about how they perpetuated them by refusing entry to others like them. Thus "the poachers" had become the "gamekeepers", ardently supporting the emphasis firms placed on traditional forms of institutionalised and embodied forms of cultural capital.

This data illuminates the dialectical relationship between inclusionary usurpation (Murphy, 1988) and exclusion, where people who usurped their way through prevailing exclusionary processes become the most vociferous defenders of exclusionary practices. Significantly the "poachers" in our sample not only fully endorsed prevailing discriminatory ideologies but also drew on these to guide their children. Unprompted, respondents explained how they

ensured that their children acquired traditional forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) so that they would be well-equipped to develop their careers. Some respondents talked about how they targeted well-branded universities in the West to educate their children:

*My daughter graduated from Sussex she got a 2:1. I have convinced her to do a masters in a better university like Warwick or LSE (Hulanka, 54)*

Others explained the pains they took to get their children into Colombo's leading private schools to guarantee their fluency in English and their ability to comport themselves in what were seen as culturally valued ways. Some even enrolled their children in elocution for extra training:

*They go for elocution twice a week, they are sitting for the LAMDA exams this year, and they have finished all the trinity college London exams (Diluni, 41)*

Diluni, who had previously been subject to exclusion, saw elocution as essential for her children's career development. Speech and drama would not only develop children's public speaking skills but also their confidence - a crucial element of cultural capital. Highlighting how people use their own position to secure their children's career futures, our findings illuminate the crucial generational effects of the transformation of 'poachers to gamekeepers', an aspect which (to our knowledge) does not feature in the western literature on organisational closure.

## Discussion

In this article, we have examined how a group of highly skilled workers in Sri Lanka account for class-based closure in their organisations. We make three contributions: empirical and conceptual. First we show how class-based exclusion works in the country's emerging occupational sectors. Echoing the literature, our study highlighted exclusionary processes based on cultural assets (Empson and Ashley, 2013; Kaur, 2013) and also social ones – particularly family background and highly valued social contacts (Saher, 2011) Scholars have talked about how rural youth are excluded from the Sri Lankan private sector (see Winslow and Woost, 2004). Our analysis differs in the illumination of a more finely grained view of exclusion amongst urban youth, a group generally understood as privileged. The most striking feature of exclusion in this context is holes in the assets firms sought to secure their elite status. Organisations traded international work experience and exceptional work-related skills for the traditional requirement for foreign degrees. Our respondents were well aware of these shifting sands, and their accounts vividly portrayed the ways in which they manoeuvred around these changing imperatives. Based on this evidence, we challenge prevailing understandings which depict closure processes as fixed and static (Sommerlad, 2007; Hartmaan, 2000) highlighting the flexible and contradictory nature of exclusionary processes in Sri Lanka's emerging private sector.

Second we contextualise the class-based closure in the Sri Lankan private sector. Our findings show how the wider institutional context significantly shapes prevailing processes of exclusion and usurpation, illuminating three features in particular. First, the decline of the state university system in Sri Lanka and the emergence of franchise foreign universities in the country have led to firms prioritising new recruits with foreign degrees. There is a powerful symbolic dimension to this requirement. Like elite firms in the West (see Empson

and Ashley, 2013), Sri Lankan private sector organisations seek to brand themselves as exclusive by targeting personnel from elite institutions. This symbolic capital is easy to achieve because of the sheer number of foreign degree holders amongst urban educated youth. Second, under the pressures of globalisation elite firms in Sri Lanka (as firms elsewhere) must continually find ways to enhance their competitiveness. This persistent need to change has created holes in their long-established recruitment criteria and spaces for usurpation. Third, the British colonial influence continues as a salient factor in new firms' exclusionary practices. As noted earlier, qualifications from UK universities are accorded more status than other renowned institutions in Asia and the West, and work experience in the UK is preferred over other countries. During British rule, Sri Lankan people who intended to develop a career within the newly created professions adopted the cultural norms and linguistic styles of their colonial administrators and such adaptations had helped them to accumulate wealth and influence (Jayawardena, 2002). Decades after independence, institutionalised and embodied forms of cultural capital linked to Britain are still highly valued in contemporary Sri Lankan organisations. Thus the processes and practices examined in our research are steeped in Sri Lanka's colonial past (see also Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002; Jones, 1989; Sinha and Sinha, 1990 for effects of the British Raj on Asian organisations) and influenced by the country's current position in the global marketplace. However, we are not suggesting that these contextual features impact on class-based closure in a simple or deterministic way. Rather, they are part of a complex picture. Sensitised by a societal effects approach (see Maurice et al. 1980) we thus extend prevailing understandings of class based closure in organisations (Cooke et al. 2012; Empson and Ashley, 2013; Hartmaan, 2000) by showing how organisational exclusion and usurpation are shaped by wider institutions such as the national education system, global market

pressures and historical legacies. These coalesce to create nationally distinct features to these organizations (both nostalgic and modern) which are played out not only in organizations' processes of social closure, but also in individuals' responses.

Third, highlighting how 'poachers turn game keepers' we show the dialectical relationship between exclusion and inclusionary usurpation (Murphy, 1984) in Sri Lanka's emerging private sector. Echoing existing understandings of inclusionary usurpation (Sommerlad, 2007; Ross, 1999) individuals who were squeezed out of private sector firms at junior levels due to their lack of traditional cultural assets acquired alternative forms of cultural assets, specialised skills and/or international experience and traded these for more traditional requirements thus gaining entry to prestigious organizations via alternative routes. These respondents can be likened to poachers who creep into others' territory and take their resources. However, our analysis differs from and extends existing understandings in two important ways. First, we show how once these individuals secure their positions, they become gamekeepers policing the barriers to prevent other poachers from getting in. These respondents fully embraced the traditional rules and justifications which excluded them and perpetuated these by closing entry to others like them. Second, we found that this process continues across generations, as respondents seek to equip their children with appropriate traditional cultural capital in order to secure their future career prospects. We would argue that such actions work to sustain prevailing class-based barriers ensuring that individuals from the margins continue to find it difficult to enter. However, this situation is continually threatened by members of other classes, who through the acquisition of much sought after global career capital and rare forms of human capital, have the potential to disturb this fragile social order. By using exclusion and usurpation to examine highly skilled workers'

accounts of recruitment and selection in the emerging private sector, we are able to understand how discriminatory selection processes are sustained and maintained over time even though they are regularly breached.

### **Implications and directions for further research**

Our findings have theoretical and managerial implications. With respect to theory, we contextualise class-based closure in the Sri Lankan private sector. Drawing on the societal effects approach (see Maurice et al. 1980) we show how organisational exclusion and usurpation are shaped by wider institutions such as the national education system, global market pressures and historical understandings. Second, we show the flexible and contradictory nature of exclusionary processes highlighting holes in the assets firms sought to secure their elite status. Third we show the dialectical relationship between exclusion and inclusionary usurpation (Murphy, 1984) in Sri Lanka's emerging private sector. Our analysis reveals how social closure is sustained and maintained over time, and simultaneously illuminates how discriminatory practices and processes are regularly breached. In contrast

to the dominant view of organizational closure as deeply embedded, static and resistant to change (Hartmaan, 2000), our findings lead to a conceptualisation that is fluid and dynamic. From this perspective we would argue that organizational closure is more usefully depicted as a process, continuously shaped by on-going interactions between gatekeepers, incumbents (Murphy, 1984) and new recruits, as well as wider socio-economic exigencies (Maurice et al. 1980).

Turning to managerial implications, we show how traditional cultural assets such as language skills can be acquired at a later stage in life thus exposing the prevailing



exclusionary processes as fundamentally illogical. This is a vital finding for those involved in the setting up and implementation of organizations' recruitment practices. More generally, our analysis can raise employees' awareness of (a) the presence subtle, exclusionary processes in Sri Lanka's most 'modern' organizations; (b) the extent to which these are at once enduring and precarious and subject to breach and challenge. If these modern organizations and emerging sectors are serious about creating new opportunities for Sri Lankan people, such awareness is a crucial starting point.

These findings also have important implications for policy, raising policy makers' awareness of class-based exclusion in leading firms in the newly emerging private sector. Given that this sector pays high salaries, employment in this sector is a source of social mobility for educated youth in the country. Thus class related entry barriers have significant implications for not only diversity and equality within the private sector but also the social class composition of Sri Lankan society. Although the private sector has always been seen as exclusive (Winslow and Woost, 2004), it is also a key player in enhancing social mobility, providing training and subsequent employment to disadvantaged groups in the country especially those affected by the war (Dharmawardane, 2013). However our findings reveal that social inequalities are maintained or even exacerbated by this sector's prevailing recruitment practices. Significantly, it is highly likely that class-based closure exists in other industries apart from the IT and finance sectors we examined. Indeed it is extremely important to examine closure in other industries as well.

Significantly we call upon scholars to further develop our work. A case study of a single organisation may provide greater insights into the practice of capital trading we have

highlighted. A more fine grained analysis through an ethnographic methodology would provide insights into the extent to which new entrants to these firms fulfill the traditional requirements of embodied cultural capital such as style, poise and pronunciation and the ability to 'fit in' with the others is seen as imperative for junior posts. This is important to fully understand class-based closure and the ideologies underlying these processes. Finally it is important to examine women and ethnic minority workers' accounts of class-based closure. Scholars have argued that criteria of exclusion itself can be gendered and thus particularly disadvantageous for women. And in the case of usurpation, in a patriarchal society, female actors may have differential access to the tactical means of achieving their aims (Witz, 1992). While our respondents were insistent that existing recruitment criteria in their modern, western style organisations do not work against women, they also agreed that in a country like Sri Lanka characterized by conventional gender ideologies and norms of good behavior for women (Wijayatilake, 2001), women who intend to accumulate foreign experience in order to break in can only do so if they are married and have a supportive partner. In other words, strategic courses of action are gendered. In the light of these findings it is important for future research to examine whether as 'poachers' Sri Lankan women are as successful as their male counterparts. With regard to ethnicity, our respondents agreed that elite 'western style' private organizations do not engage in ethnic discrimination as the more traditional public sector in the country. The two Tamil respondents commented that the use of English as the universal language in this elite environment worked in favour of upper class ethnic minorities since it played down their ethnicity. It is important for future studies to more fully examine the intersection between ethnicity and class in private organisations' recruitment processes. We invite scholars to address these important areas highlighted in our work.

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**Table 1**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Designation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Credentials</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Fulfilment of traditional criteria</b>
Anil	52	Financial Services	Head of Financial analysis	Male	BSc (London) FCMA (UK)	Sinhalese	Yes
Manela	36	Financial Services	Associate Vice President	Female	BA Melbourne	Sinhalese	Yes
Pramuk	46	Financial Services	Marketing manager	Male	BSc (Lboro) CIM (UK)	Sinhalese	Yes
Vinodh	38	Information technology	Senior Consultant	Male	BSc Eng (Sri Lanka) BCS (UK) ACS (Aus)	Sinhalese	No
Kalana	41	Financial services	Assistant Vice president quantitative analysis	Male	BA Sri Lanka CIMA (UK), CFA (USA)	Sinhalese	No
Timali	36	Information Technology	Senior manager restructuring	Female	BSc (Sri Lanka), MBA (Manchester)	Sinhalese	No
Nuwan	59	Information Technology	Director	Male	BSc Mngt (UK) MBA (Leicester)	Sinhalese	Yes
Duwara	39	Information Technology	Senior manager	Female	BSc (Sri Lanka), BCS (UK)	Sinhalese	No
Hulanka	54	Information Technology	Head of strategic planning	Female	BSc (Purdue), FCMA (UK),	Sinhalese	Yes
Chanaka	29	Information technology	Senior executive HRM	Male	BA (Leicester)	Sinhalese	Yes
Trehan	31	Financial Services	Senior Analyst	Male	BA (UCL)	Sinhalese	Yes
Pasindu	26	Information technology	Senior Engineer	Male	BA (Bristol)	Sinhalese	Yes

Kavya	37	Financial Services	Assistant vice president	Female	BSc Colombo ACMA UK	Sinhalese	No
Kalinga	25	Information Technology	Assistant Manager Networking	Male	BA (Imperial College UK)	Sinhalese	Yes
Diluni	41	Financial services	Head of training and development	Female	BSc Sri Lanka MBA (Manchester)	Sinhalese	No
Janith	49	Information Technology	Director	Male	BA (Warwick)	Sinhalese	Yes
Gamini	34	Information technology	Manager corporate solutions	Male	BSc (Sri Lanka) BSC (UK)	Sinhalese	No
Hiruni	31	Information technology	Corporate restructuring executive	Female	BSc (Reading)	Sinhalese	Yes
Yohan	45	Information Technology	Senior manager	Male	BSc (Sri Lanka) BCS (UK)	Sinhalese	No
Swasha	47	Financial Services	Vice President	Female	BSc (Sri Lanka) FCMA (UK) CFA (USA)	Sinhalese	No
Lakmini	35	Information technology	Human resource manager	Female	BSc (Alabama) MA HRM (Leicester)	Sinhalese	Yes
Layangi	31	Information technology	Senior Engineer	Female	BEng (London)	Sinhalese	Yes
Indika	48	Financial Services	Senior Vice president	Male	BSc (London) CFA (USA)	Sinhalese	Yes
Brijesh	45	Information Technology	Senior manager	Male	BSc (Sussex) MBA (Queenland)	Tamil	Yes
Tripti	27	Financial Services	Senior Analyst	Female	BA (Warwick)	Tamil	Yes

### Interview themes:

1. What are the criteria to secure a graduate management trainee position in your organization?
  - What are the criteria to secure a middle management position in your organization?
  - What are the criteria to secure a senior management position in your organization?
2. Why are these important?
3. Does everybody fulfill these criteria? Did you satisfy these criteria?
4. If not, how did you/they manage to get in?
5. Can you describe the recruitment and selection process you went through? What kinds of questions are asked in interviews?
6. Why is foreign experience important for management positions?
7. What are the specialized skills you seek in management recruits?
  - How are these assessed?
  - Do graduate management trainee recruits have these skills?
  - Why are these skills so important to your organization?
1. To what extent do you justify traditional recruitment criteria?
2. If you are a selector, what would you look for in graduate management recruits?
8. In the light of your experience, what advice would you give to young people hoping to enter the Sri Lankan private sector?
9. Biographical information:
  - How old are you?
  - What is your current designation?
  - Can you describe your key job duties?

- Where did you work before? Can you provide a brief preview of your education and employment experience to date?
- What does your spouse do?
- Where do you live?
- Do you have any children? Where do they school?