Beyond a Binary Model of Students' Educational Decision-Making

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Abstract

This paper's focus is on young people's university decision-making processes. It offers two key arguments in response to the model of decision-making which predominates in the classed practices literature. Firstly, that the dominant decision-making model obscures the extent of variation within the middle-class; and secondly, that commonly articulated notions of 'certainty and entitlement' need to be deconstructed to render them sociologically meaningful. I argue that the model developed by Stephen Ball, Diane Reay and colleagues had established itself as a key influence in the field, and indeed, it continues to provide a reference for those exploring student decision-making as a classed practice. In having drawn from Bourdieu's conceptual framework their account of educational practices takes us some distance beyond the labels and boxes of class analysis. My findings intersect and contrast with what has become a binary model of working-class disadvantage versus middle-class privilege. The narratives presented in this paper contribute to, but in many ways challenge what has become an influential and pervasive model of student choice.

Keywords: *Bourdieu; Habitus; Decision-Making; Middle-Class; Hot Knowledge*

Introduction

For the middle classes it is the best of times and the worst of times; a time of affluence and risk, opportunity and congestion, celebration and anxiety (Ball 2003: 4).

1.1 Over the last decade, and with the emergence of what Mike Savage describes as a 'new kind of cultural class analysis' (2003), there has been widespread engagement with the nature of class as implicit and embedded within the routines of daily life.

1.2 Whereas the working class once dominated the study of class analysis, the research lens has more recently been directed towards those who occupy the middle ground. The middle classes, their practices and tastes have offered new ways in which to conceptualise 'class', and educational decision-making has provided fertile terrain for what has been a reinvigoration, and arguably a *reinvention* of 'class' from what Crompton coins the 'employment aggregate' approach (2008). Underpinned by the conceptual framework offered by Pierre Bourdieu, and in particular, the concepts of habitus and capital, educational decision-making has been represented as a 'classed practice' and indeed a practice in which the middle classes excel (inter alia Ball 2003; Ball 2002; Crozier et al. 2008; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Reay 2010).

1.3 Thus with literature spanning choice of nursery, school and university, education has become a key site in which to explore classed practices. This article focuses on transitions to university, which represent a particular moment in the reproduction of classed inequalities, and which provide the backdrop for a growing body of 'classed practices' research in the sociology of education. Whilst successive government policy has focused on widening participation, the nature of that participation varies according to students' social class and the type of school attended, with privately educated and middle-class students dominating the so-called 'elite', selective universities (Sutton Trust 2004; 2005; 2011). Higher education decisions are set within the context of the United Kingdom having moved from an elite system to a mass system and now more recently has 'universal' status. (Trow 1974). However, and as Trow (ibid) anticipated, the nature and type of those universities is diverse and stratified. Despite the removal in 1992 of what was termed the 'binary divide' between universities and the more vocationally-oriented

polytechnics, the field of higher education is stratified by the perceived quality and status of its institutions. Amidst repeated claims of universal benefits accruing to graduates, there is an increasing fear that a degree is no longer 'enough', and as Power and Whitty contend, 'these blanket assertions ignore the extent to which particular kinds of higher education confer differential advantages' (2008: 2).

1.4 It is against this background that the middle classes are said to be 'intensifying efforts' towards securing advantage for their children, and it is 'more important than ever to get the 'right' university degree' (Power and Whitty 2008: 3). The scene is set for families to take part in a competition whose rules are new and the prizes uncertain. The stakes have been raised and the middle classes are presented through the classed practices literature as better able and more willing to engage in the active and strategic working of the system (Ball 2003; Devine 2004; Reay et al. 2005). Indeed, it is an emphasis on middle class parents' strategic response to an increasingly competitive and congested field that characterises educational 'classed practices' research, and there is a noticeable absence of middle class young people themselves. In contrast to a sustained interest in the difficulties encountered by those described as outsiders or newcomers to the higher education system through their class, ethnicity or age (Archer 2003; Archer 2010; Ball et al. 2002; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Thomas and Quinn 2007), middle-class transitions to university have been somewhat neglected. Crudely positioned in relation to the richer narratives of their working-class peers, there has been a tendency to characterise middle-class transitions as linear and straightforward, and with such students' 'confidence, certainty and sense of entitlement....generated through high levels of cultural capital....' (Reay, David and Ball 2005: 21). According to Reay et al.'s study of higher education choice, for 'middle-class young people....the decision to go to university is a non-decision' (ibid: 33). Moreover, as Rachel Brooks observes, 'implicit in these studies seems to be an assumption of a unitary and homogenous middle-class, defined primarily in terms of its difference from the working class' (2005: 119). The higher education field, and in particular its prestigious institutions, have been represented as the province, perhaps the natural territory, of the middle-class student.

1.5 This article has as its broad objective to carve a space between binary extremes of middle-class privilege and working-class disadvantage, which are embedded within the dominant paradigm of students' university decision-making. The article is written from a longitudinal research project, which had its primary focus a group of 12 young people through two years' A level study^[1]. Based on their parents' occupations, the young people are all defined as 'middle-class', however their middle-class 'tag' is one that obscures very varied compositions of capital and widely divergent dispositions to the university decision-making process. The article therefore seeks to deconstruct the nature of the capital accumulations and its conceptual focus is on what has been widely coined as 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998; Ball et al. 2002; Ball 2003; Reay et al. 2005; Reay 2010), and what can be understood as a fusion of Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital. However, whilst the main thrust is that accumulations of 'hot knowledge' mean that 'a significant majority of middle-class applicants (are)engaging with higher education choice in contexts of certainty and entitlement' (Reay 2010: 77), we know little about the processes and practices which generate that 'hot knowledge'.

1.6 Furthermore, when talking about those young people whose transitions to university are characterised by privilege and certainty, there is a tendency to conflate their social class with the type of school attended. Reay describes it as 'normative in the private schools to pay serious attention' to league tables and she identifies a different chronology to the decision-making process with visits as 'confirmation rather than elimination' of choice for state school students^[2]. Access to 'hot' knowledge was, for private students, of 'a totally different order to that of the far less well connected students...' (2005:152). The notion of a private school is one represented as a site of privilege and moreover, as homogeneously middle-class. There is no space for the contradiction and complexity of more diverse social class positions within the private school (Davey 2009). Instead, the influence of the educational institution is seen to compound the privilege of being middle-class (Reay 2010). Furthermore, with an absence of young middle-class people's voices, and instead an emphasis on their parents' strategic involvement, we are given very limited understanding as to how the 'hot knowledge' is negotiated or contested by the young people themselves. We are therefore unaware of how middle-class students develop their affinities with prestigious universities, and what lies behind the paradox of natural distinction (Bourdieu 1990a: 108). Thus through the use of biographic narrative interviews and a range of ethnographic research methods carried out over time, I aim to capture practice as on-going and incomplete. The young people's narratives add complexity and nuance to our understanding of middle-class transitions to university.

Methodology

2.1 The longitudinal research project from which this article is written took place during the academic years 2006/7 to 2008/9, and involved young people, staff and parents. The research was carried out across two sites: the sixth-form of a private school, which I called 'Grayshott Grammar' and a state sixth-form college, which I called 'Winterbourne College'. The research comprised biographic narrative interviews, semi-structured interviews and observations from time spent in both institutions. The 12 young people who participated in the research were interviewed at regular intervals during their two years of A-level study. The students had in common that they were currently or had previously, attended 'Grayshott Grammar'. Six had spent their secondary education there, three had joined its sixth-form from the state sector, and three had left Grayshott Grammar aged 16 to join Winterbourne College. Using parental occupation as a measure of their social class, all 12 young people were defined as middle-class. However, that classification embraced parents with very different levels of knowledge and experience of the English higher education system.

Using Bourdieu's tools of habitus and capital

2.2 In addressing class through a Bourdieuan lens, the emphasis is on how class happens through practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1987; 1990a; 1990b; 1992; 1998). Thus, for Bourdieu, unlike the concern of traditional class analysis to explain class consciousness and exploitation, the focus is on the structured and structuring practices generated by habitus. The concept of habitus, which is central to Bourdieu's attempts to transcend the duality of structure and agency, promises to illustrate how 'class' is lived and experienced through individual subjectivities. The intention of habitus is as a means of 'escaping both the objectivism of action understood as a mechanical reaction 'without an agent' and the subjectivism which portrays actions as the deliberate pursuit of a conscious intention...' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 121). Habitus generates the 'feel for the game' or the 'natural' response. Through their position in social space, individuals develop a habitus which disposes them to make certain choices over others. With the development of a classed practices paradigm, habitus has been most fully and effectively utilised to explain the feelings of discomfort and awkwardness experienced by working-class young people in relation to the field of education. However, the workings of the habitus have been all but eliminated from accounts of middle-class decision-making.

2.3 Indeed, the frequently referenced Bourdieuan notion of the middle-classes' 'feel for the game' is reduced to acquisition of 'hot knowledge', which is determined by students' acquisition of cultural and social capital. As Andrew Sayer points out, there is a 'tension created by the combination of economic metaphors associated with rational calculation and exorbitant claims for the power of habitus throughout his work....' (2005: 39-40). In his critique, Sayer foregrounds the normative dimension of practice, and he argues that the concept of habitus, with its emphasis on pre-reflexivity, fails to capture the 'inner conversations' that influence our decisions (ibid). Moreover, although we know something about the nature of 'hot knowledge', there is a gap in terms of how we understand its transmission to the young people themselves. In addressing 'class' through a Bourdieuan lens, whilst the accumulation and deployment of cultural and social capital are implicated in the reproduction of middle-class privilege, the workings of the habitus are not so clearly exposed.

2.4 With my methodological focus on biographic narrative interviews, I sought to explore and expose the decision-making as on-going and negotiated by the young people. The binary model of educational practice has a tendency to position middle-class, privately educated students as doubly-privileged (Reay 2010: 78). However, the narratives here reveal a more complex picture and suggest variations of middle-class decision-making, and which I present as three distinct types. For some, the advantages were striking, and theirs was an altogether more ethereal form of insider knowledge, and something that was almost invisibly woven into the fabric of family life. As I will discuss through the narratives below, its diffuseness enables us to tease out the innocuous and mundane details which serve to differentiate those within the middle-class. It is the tiny details, what is unsaid as much as what is said that distinguishes the variations of middle-class decision-making.

2.5 That is not to dismiss what they shared, and one reading of their narratives is as illustrations of economic capital put to work. Any concerns about the potential financial burden of taking a degree were not articulated. Furthermore, for two of the three groups, the choice of any particular university was unbounded by financial concerns. That these young people's decision-making processes were of a very different nature to their working class peers was not in doubt. However, the variations within the group were quite striking nonetheless. What served to distinguish them helped to deconstruct the sometimes vague notions of privilege. As will become clear, they held very diverse types of social capital, and this can be seen as providing access to elite places within the higher education system. Whilst Stephen Ball cautions against its 'being sociologically useless as a result of over-use and misuse' (2005: 79), I will argue that it is social capital, above all, that offers the greatest potential for understanding and dissecting how middle-class practice happens.

2.6 Before turning to my empirical findings, I would like to summarise the types of middle-class chooser which emerged from the data.

Natural, effortless, destined

3.1 I have described those students who are positioned closest to the elite universities as 'natural, effortless and destined'. Three of the twelve students are described in this way. They embody a middle-class habitus which is in close proximity to the field of higher education. There is a strong congruence between familial and education cultures, with a family history of attending prestigious universities. Students describe decision-making as having been discussed with their families, although not as a particular moment, or as especially significant. These students hold high levels of cultural capital, and most notably display an easy and laid-back confidence during the university application process. What distinguishes these students is access to very specific social capital through a variety of friends and family who have attended elite universities.

Strategic and ambitious

3.2 In contrast to this casual, almost indifferent approach to the university application process, six of the students are described as 'strategic and ambitious'. These are students whose families have some history of higher education, although not necessarily close family and not usually in elite universities. For these students, families are described as playing an active role in their decision-making. Although holding high levels of cultural capital, in contrast to the first group they are less confident in their approach, and less sure of their chances of reaching their ideal university destination. These students identify the 'top' universities, and spend time reading guides, consulting leagues tables, and above all displaying a sophisticated knowledge of the system. However, they are not confident of success and are worried about the competition for places. Access to social capital is likely to be through a wide range of

people both inside and outside the family, however its form is generalised.

Aspiring and vocationally-specific

3.3 The final group of students are described as 'aspiring and vocationally-specific choosers'. These are students whose parental occupation confers a middle-class label, but who nevertheless have little or no experience of higher education. The students' cultural capital is reasonably high in terms of academic credentials, yet their knowledge of the university application process is poor. They consult university prospectuses, but show little interest in hierarchy or status. Instead, for these students, the primary concern is vocational, with university regarded as a necessary step towards a career. Decision-making is described as an activity carried out independently or with friends. Parents are described as supportive rather than actively involved in the process. The students have limited social capital and this is from friends' experiences of going to university. Unlike the first two groups, where the costs associated with going to university are not mentioned, the financial considerations of travelling and living at university are dimensions of the decision-making process.

Narratives of choice

4.1 Let me now illustrate the model through some examples of how students made their university choices.

Natural, effortless, destined

4.2 The extract from James's narrative (below) provides an illustration of a student who I have defined as 'natural, effortless and destined'. He exemplifies how for this group of students, 'hot knowledge' was high-quality and the only knowledge they needed.

4.3 James:

My parents are both doctors but my father I'd say probably is more into research into medicine. So I come from a kind of science-based family....I've not considered league tables too much. I've heard people refer to them, and I might consult them if I need to make up the numbers. But at the moment I'm thinking mainly about Cambridge and Manchester.

4.4 For James, whose education had been at Grayhott Grammar, league tables offer little in comparison with the family history of university participation. University decisions are part and parcel of the normal family discussions he remembers from childhood. Going to university has always been assumed. Manchester or Cambridge present themselves as tried and tested options. These are not sought out through external fact-finding and James makes no reference to advice or guidance from Grayshott Grammar. His narrative suggests little need for their extensive coaching system. James' family environment has produced a habitus which is congruent with the elite universities to which he aspires. This is an example of the logic of practice, where habitus and field are in harmony. James has developed an innate knowledge of the field of elite universities, and there is a sense that he will need to do no more than what is always done. The field of universities is effortlessly and unconsciously narrowed to just two: he is safe and secure in the knowledge that close family relatives have followed that same path.

4.5 For Michael, similarly at Grayshott Grammar, there is a strong family history of university participation. Michael's father studied at Cambridge and provides him with first-hand experience. Michael describes gaining a feel for the place at a recent christening held in one of the colleges. Michael has privileged access to a personal and usually private space within the university. His experience stands in stark contrast to the more formal and structured encounter for students whose interview or official open-day introduces them to Oxbridge. For Michael, the university becomes woven into the life of the family. Cambridge becomes a real place where people like him study and socialise.

4.6 However at our second meeting, Michael tells me that he decided against applying to Cambridge, and that he has by now received an offer for Oxford:

Um, after I ruled out Cambridge, because um I went to look at both, but I really preferred Oxford. I've got friends up there and I stayed with them because there was a wedding there at one of the colleges. So I looked around the area and I got to know it a lot more than when I first went up. So it just seemed like a natural choice really.

How did you choose St Johns?

I met an undergraduate when I went up for the day, and he went to Balliol and we were talking to him, and 'cos originally I was thinking about loads of different colleges and my Dad's friend (who went to Oxford) knows like which ones to apply for. So he gave me his opinion on each one.

4.7 Again, the field is narrowed through access to 'hot knowledge' gained through family and friends. The information is of a completely different kind to what is available from a prospectus. Michael draws on social capital of a very specific kind. He tells me he knows family and friends who have studied or taught at either Oxford or Cambridge, and who continue to provide social opportunities to visit the universities. The christening and wedding are examples of the way that these elite universities become more closely tied to the home. There is social bridge between family life and such universities. The exposure to Oxbridge's private domain, together with the very specific informal knowledge renders such choices

natural for Michael. The colleges are deconstructed as meaningful and distinctive options which are there for his choosing. After a hint of rebellion, ultimately the field of higher education is narrowed to particular Oxbridge colleges.

4.8 For Felicity, who was also at Grayshott Grammar, the range of options is narrow. Although she defines herself as 'not that bright' and 'lazy', her imagined future university was restricted from the outset. Again, there was little reference to league tables, and Felicity relied on information from her family. She told me that both parents had attended university, and her cousins' university destinations are mentioned during our interviews. We can see her as positioned within the field of higher education through a close familial history. As in the young men's accounts, Felicity made no reference to advice from Grayshott Grammar, and she was dismissive when I raised this. Indeed, she told me she had rejected her tutor's advice to include an 'insurance' option on the UCAS application, and instead she followed an approach used previously by her cousins.

4.9 Felicity's first choice of University is Leeds, and she describes how her aunts' advice and cousins' experience have helped to form that choice.

Both my aunts, they've had children go through the system. The one with the girl, she went to Cambridge, but the boys went to more *normal people* universities. It's quite nice having a balance. So that's helped.

4.10 Decision-making is based on detailed and specific information from within the family. The dominant theme of Felicity's narrative was of her family's positive experience of higher education. Nevertheless, she articulated the pressure and weight of expectation that is part and parcel of that tradition. Felicity's educational decision-making is closely matched to the experiences of other members of her family. For example, she identifies a cousin at Cambridge as 'incredibly intelligent', but contrasts her with others who are having 'more fun' at what Felicity terms as 'normal people universities'. Her range of options is narrow nonetheless, with 'normal people universities' all traditional, research-led institutions.

4.11 For those I have described as 'natural, effortless, destined', decisions are made from their position already being *within* the field of elite universities. The knowledge and experience of higher education presents university decision-making as an embedded part of family life. These students have accumulated capital, with social and cultural capital combining with economic capital to maximise their advantage.

4.12 Although Michael, James and Felicity have attended Grayshott Grammar for the whole of their secondary education, their model of decision-making is not necessarily restricted to those in the independent sector. The high levels of capital derived from family are enough to position these students firmly within the field of elite universities. In the case of Michael, James and Felicity, their familial habitus is in harmony with the aspirations set out for them at Grayshott Grammar, but it is difficult to see evidence of the institution making a difference to their boundaries of choice. For example, in contrast with the students' narratives below, none of the three described seeking advice from the tutors, UCAS Co-ordinator or Careers Advisor allocated to help students in their decision-making.

4.13 In many ways, their narratives were a rejection and a contradiction of the norms of middle-class decision-making. The narratives were characterised by a casual and relaxed attitude towards the application process. They provided few references to anything that might be described as active or highly-planned decision-making. One surprising element of their approach that set them apart from the young people I have described as 'strategic and ambitious' was the absence of organised university visits. Whilst all had visited the universities which became their first choice, these weren't described as special, planned occasions or attendance at formal open days. They were instead coincidental with family trips to the city or local area where the university was situated. Again, this is suggestive of the thin line between family and elite university: boundaries between home and university are so permeable to be unremarkable. In contrast to the binary model's emphasis on the use of visits and open-days by middle-class choosers, my findings suggested that the 'natural, effortless and destined' students had no such need.

4.14 All this is reminiscent of the familial habitus as being sufficiently embedded within the field to obviate the requirement for effort or work. As Bourdieu argues:

...their habitus, their socially constituted nature, is immediately adjusted to the immanent demands of the game, and thus they can assert their difference without needing to want do.....to strive for distinction is the opposite of distinction: firstly because it involves recognition of a lack and a disavowal of a self-seeking aspiration, and secondly because.....consciousness and reflexivity are both cause and symptom of the failure of immediate adaptation to the situation which defines the virtuoso. (Bourdieu 1990b: 11)

4.15 The virtuoso performance is illustrated very clearly in Michael and James' accounts of their Oxbridge interviews. Both narratives were presentations of skilful and critical engagement with a process they described as 'enjoyable' and 'a lot of fun'. The interviews allowed both young men the opportunity to display the cultural capital that had been acquired during childhoods of effortless inculcation in the world of science, reason and logic. Close proximity to the field through habitus and capital is misrecognised as confidence and ease at university interviews. As I have already stated, there are difficulties in using Bourdieu's concept of 'capital' empirically, and in the narratives below, we will see how family and educational institution blur as sites for their accumulation. However, for the 'natural, effortless and destined' students, the narratives were suggestive of those who had at their disposal high levels of cultural capital gained through familial inculcation to that world. Cultural capital was not worked at, rather

exposed to during the routines of family life.

4.16 Operating alongside cultural capital were clear examples of how social capital provided yet further advantage. The insider knowledge and access to the field's informal domains were seamlessly and imperceptibly gathered through family and friends. It was this high-quality social capital that distinguished these students from their middle-class peers. Those I designated as 'natural, effortless, destined' were not actively and energetically engaged in the process of university decision-making because in a sense, they were already there, inhabiting the field.

'Strategic and ambitious' decision-making

4.17 Let me now look at how the students in the group I describe as 'strategic and ambitious' make their decisions about where to apply to university. For these students the range of possible choices was notably wider than the first group, and remained so throughout the process. The young people articulated the clearest and most detailed understanding of the range and type of options. The extract below provides a good example of the extent to which these students were knowledgeable about the university hierarchy:

I look at the prospectus and what grades they expect you to get. I mean for Law, they usually expect either 3 As, ABB, or the minimum of BBB. But I don't want to get that low...

4.18 Stephen, who joined Grayshott Grammar's sixth-form from the state sector, is putting together choices on a matrix of status and geographic location. Unlike the narrative extracts discussed earlier, his conceptualisation of university is more vaguely constructed. These are imagined choices rather than real places. He paints a picture of the kind of place where he believes he would like to study. These are not conceived of as unrealistic, but at the same time these are not familiar or known places.

4.19 Unlike those in the 'natural, effortless, destined' students, there is no direct experience or family history of higher education and Stephen tells me his parents' views on what he should study are based on the culture from their home country (he had spent his early childhood in the Middle East). He complains how his parents have been actively researching university options, that they have strong views on what his future career will be, and how their own wishes reflect the status of a very different higher education system. However Stephen says he is determined to make his own choices, and explains how he uses prospectuses, together with league tables to find his UCAS options. Potential destinations are evaluated according to expected A-level grades, and he demonstrates quite specific knowledge about the requirements for his chosen degree. Although Stephen is 'choosy' and ambitious about where to study, he is working within a far broader range of possibilities than those of James, Michael and Felicity.

4.20 Stephen's narrative conveys a picture of parents attempting to improve their knowledge of the higher education system through gathering prospectuses and guides. Their knowledge of the UK university system is limited, and they struggle to translate existing cultural capital to something of value for their son. Unlike the families described above, Stephen's parents are unable to draw on their own experience of the system, and in fact their efforts to advise are seen by Stephen as unhelpful and out of touch. Whereas for some families we could see how cultural and social capital amalgamated to position their children on the inside of the field, there is a sense here that Stephen is an outsider.

4.21 The process of choosing university options is not natural or easy. With his parents' expectations of their son following a science-based career, the narrative account is one of conflict and then negotiation. The head of Grayshott Grammar becomes involved as Stephen attempts to change his A-level subjects after embarking on science subjects and very quickly struggling with the work. Stephen tells me that the head teacher persuades the family that a career in law would offer a reasonable alternative and Stephen's parents construct an alternative career hierarchy. Stephen explains how he swaps two of his science A-levels for English and Philosophy:

The careers people have told me that the A-levels I'm doing now are the perfect combination for me to get into any Law school. My best subject is Philosophy and they've told me that the Universities are quite keen on that.

4.22 Grayshott Grammar plays an important role in Stephen's decision-making. Sixth-form tutors provide repair work when the original plans begin to disintegrate soon into his A-level study. University choices result from negotiations between family and school. Yet these negotiations steer choices towards university courses which resonate with the school's own position in the field and its institutionally-specific and limited range of possibilities. (Davey: forthcoming).

4.23 Like Stephen, Louise has recently joined Grayshott Grammar from a state sector secondary school. Louise's narrative is illustrative of a planned and well-researched narrowing of the university choices. In her first interview, she described very clear aspirations to 'go to the best university (I) can'. Again, her boundaries of choice are relatively narrow, although in contrast with the 'natural, effortless and destined', these are all real and hoped for possibilities rather than 'making up the numbers'. Louise is knowledgeable about the hierarchy of universities, and tells me she uses the Times and Guardian league tables to search for top universities. Louise described having plans to attend open days at Durham, Oxford, Cambridge, UCL (University College London) and Warwick, although she tells me she will need 'straight As for these', and is worried about whether this is achievable.

4.24 For Ruth, whose education had been at Grayshott Grammar, the process was one she described as driven by her mother:

She ordered about five university prospectuses for me. It was like places I didn't want to go. I said that's very nice, now you can read them mother! I don't want to read them. She's keen. She's wanted me to be a medic for ages. And for ages I didn't tell her I wanted to be. I knew she'd instantly get really into the idea. I wanted to be a medic for about a year before I told her. As soon as I told her she said 'Oh! That's so exciting!'.

How did you know she was so keen on you being a medic?

How did I know she wanted me to do medicine! She'd tell me every week. She was like, 'Why don't you want to be a doctor. Why do you want to do English?' When I was younger I used to just not listen when she talked about careers, I just tended to ignore those conversation as potential friction points. I try to avoid confrontation.

4.25 For Ruth, the process of university decision-making is not confined within the boundaries of the UCAS timetable, but part of an on-going dialogue between mother and daughter. There is a sense in Ruth's narrative of the pressure she feels as her university choice becomes a dimension of family hopes and desires. She tells me her mother left school at 16 and is 'determined' that her own children will not do the same. It seemed to me as if Ruth was carrying the weight of her mother's past disappointments and missed opportunities.

4.26 For Ruth, Stephen and Louise, the narratives of decision-making articulate a strong sense of institutional influence. Their accounts offer illustrations of how in being part of a fee-paying institution, economic capital is converted to social and cultural capital. For example, in Stephen's case the sixth-form provides an opportunity to gain work experience within a prestigious City law firm. As a newly-arrived student in the private education sector his parents can be seen as investing in a readily-available network of valuable contacts. Although Grayshott provides its own work placement scheme, Stephen tells me that a fellow student has offered him work with his parents' law firm. Outside of any formal, sixth-form process, Stephen has nevertheless gained access via more subtle and indirect means.

4.27 Similarly for Ruth, her best friend's father is a surgeon, and she tells me he has helped her to understand the different kinds of medical degree available. The social capital she has gained through a friendship is of a high-quality and specific nature. Using this knowledge she is able to refine her UCAS application and gain a more detailed understanding of medicine than would be available from university prospectuses. Moreover, in contrast to her mother's excitement and enthusiasm for Ruth to study medicine, the friend's father provides an expert perspective.

4.28 As middle-class, privately-educated students, Ruth, Stephen and Louise are characterised as the 'privileged of the privileged' in the dominant conceptualisation of student choice. However, through their accounts of the process as it unfolds, we see how the doubts, compromises and lack of confidence emerge. These are not seamless transitions. Unlike the first group, these students are seeking entry to a new field, and the narratives convey the effortful and 'worked-at' approach to acquire cultural capital. These students are hovering on the edge of the field of elite universities. Unlike the first group, who are already positioned within its symbolic boundaries, for Ruth, Stephen and Louise, successful transitions rely on the conversion of economic capital to transcend its barriers.

4.29 So far, the young people I have characterised as 'strategic and ambitious' have been students at Grayshott Grammar, and I have illustrated how their cultural and social capital has been enhanced through that institution. I am ending this section with an account which offers a different perspective. Richard's story, who left Grayshott Grammar for Winterbourne College provides an interesting reversal to what has been presented so far, and indeed illustrates how cultural capital and field must be understood as dynamic and contingent. For Richard, the decision to leave Grayshott Grammar was an attempt to acquire a new form of cultural capital, and is many ways reminiscent of the 'capital accumulation' of white, middle-class families (Crozier et al. 2008).

4.30 Richard's narrative is one that attributes an offer from Cambridge as more likely through leaving Grayshott Grammar. As I will discuss below, his story reminds us that the concept of capital is not universal or static. Moreover, it must always be seen in relation to the field, and in this case, the fields of higher education and government policy as they change over time. Richard left Grayshott Grammar to study A-levels at Winterbourne College. Of all the students' narratives, Richard's presents the most overtly strategic and carefully-planned approach to university decision-making. At our first meeting, Richard explains that his UCAS application as a privately-educated student might lead to discrimination. He talked about government quotas and the political drive towards widening access to the 'best' universities.

4.31 Richard's narrative tells us about the specificity and symbolically arbitrary nature of capital. Having left the private sector, he identifies different forms of capital that he thinks will enhance his position in the field. His university decision-making process begins when he is still in his final year at Grayshott Grammar, and he tells me he investigated summer schools and how they might help an application to Cambridge. Richard gains knowledge of the higher education field which encourages him to accrue a different kind of cultural capital, and one that can only be gained by his leaving Grayshott Grammar. One tangible example of his new cultural capital was in his successful application to the Cambridge summer school, and something for which he told me he was ineligible to apply as a private school student. Less concrete, but still an important theme in his narrative was Richard's attempts to shake off what he perceived to be the stigma of a private education. For Richard, the move to Winterbourne College represented an opportunity to enhance his cultural capital.

4.32 The young people I have described as 'strategic and ambitious' are most recognisably middle-class as presented through government discourses of responsible and knowledgeable choosers. These are in some ways 'model' students whose role is to validate the system. They are not the working-class young people whose participation remains qualitatively different or non-existent. These are the ubiquitous yet invisible middle-class, arguably those described by Mike Savage as 'particular-universal' (2003) and the colloquially labelled 'middle-England' whose practices provide an aspiration to the working-class, but also a reminder of the effortless superiority of those above.

Aspiring and vocationally-specific

4.33 By contrast, the young people in the final group have more in common with the representation of working class decision-makers. I have described them as 'aspiring and vocationally-specific' choosers, and I will start by telling Sharon's story, who left Grayshott Grammar for Winterbourne College, and who provides an illustration of university decision-making that is quite haphazard. When I ask about her thoughts on universities and courses towards the end of her first term, she says:

I've no idea. My first thought was pharmacy...um or medicine... and then one of my friends does pharmacy at university.

4.34 Sharon makes reference to using the web to gather information, however she tells me that she trusts her friends to know what she would like. For Sharon, knowledge of universities and courses was acquired mainly through friends in Winterbourne College who were already at university and some who had attended open days. Her narrative conveys no sense of drawing support from family members, and she describes her parents, who are both managers in the retail sector, as not having been to university and 'not really understanding the system'.

4.35 When I interview Sharon later in her first year, she tells me that she has now decided she wants to be a physiotherapist. She says that her university choice will be based on two factors: whether it offers a physiotherapy course, and whether it is two hours or less from her home town. Unlike the students described previously, there is no mention of university hierarchy or status. By the time she completes her UCAS form, Sharon's choices are all 'new universities' around the London area, which she tells me will allow her to stay with friends of the family. When she eventually receives a conditional offer from Middlesex she tells me she is 'so relieved' to have a clear target ahead of her. The choice of university is in many ways a non-choice. Sharon sees herself as lucky to be accepted and her focus is now on meeting the conditional offer.

4.36 When I ask Sharon about the advice available from Winterbourne College she is keen to tell me how helpful and supportive the Careers Advisor has been. She says he checked her personal statement for her and made suggestions about the grammar. Sharon explains that it was with his guidance that she refined her non-specific aspiration to enter the medical field to the more particular choice of physiotherapy. However, the support and guidance offered to Sharon at Winterbourne College was of a very different kind to the systematic and intensive approach adopted by Grayshott Grammar. Whereas Ruth and Louise described weekly 'personal statement workshops' and a series of mock interviews during the first term of their upper sixth, the students at Winterbourne College were expected to take a more independent approach. Their Careers Advisor told me he had an 'open door' policy and indeed on the occasions I spent in the department there was a steady flow of students coming in to ask for a chat. All this was very informal and casual, and unlike Grayshott Grammar's structured approach, I was told that many students were happy to just help each other.

4.37 The approaches of Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College reflect their very different positions in relation to the field of higher education (Davey, forthcoming). For Grayshott, the UCAS application process was a business-like production of cultural capital, which through its celebration and display was converted to the symbolic capital consumed by parents. The young people's decision-making processes were closely steered and 'corrected' when they threatened to deviate too far from the institutional norm. In marked contrast, the emphasis at Winterbourne College was on opening up choices, introducing students to otherwise unheard of courses. These two quite different institutional cultures were exemplified through the stories of Jemima and Kate, both of whom were classified as 'aspiring and vocational' choosers. Their stories are not only illustrative of the influence of the two sixth-form institutions, but indicative of the surprisingly faltering and fragmented middle-class decision-making processes.

4.38 Jemima joined Winterbourne College from Grayshott Grammar in order to study for A-levels. At our first meeting Jemima told me that she was keen to 'go into medicine', although when we talked about this in more depth she expressed doubts as to her ability to gain the required grades. By the end of her first year, Jemima had performed badly at AS level and her confidence had dipped further. She told me that she was now thinking about studying for a Nursing degree. When I asked her what had persuaded her to explore this option, Jemima told me that her friends and extended family were the biggest influences. She talked about cousins who were either half-way through, or had recently finished university.

I'm hoping to go to London, and I know lots of people there. They think I'll like City University, so I'll probably try for that one too. It's only asking for 3 Cs, so I'm not sure if it's like a good university or not, but my friends know the area and they say that City is a good university, academic wise.

4.39 Jemima said that her friends were the main influence on university choice, and she told me 'they know the kind of place I'll like'. The narrative does not resonate at all with the representation of middle-class young people as self-assured and knowledgeable. Seen through the lens of Bourdieu's concepts of

habitus and capital we can position Jemima at some distance from the field of higher education, with her habitus expressing lack of confidence and lack of awareness as to the possibilities available to her. Thus, the emotions and behaviours generated by her habitus, together with low levels of cultural and social capital coalesce to form a more complex and nuanced understanding than suggested by her middle-class label.

4.40 Like the working-class students typified in the binary model of educational decision-making, Jemima has no time for university visits during the application process. She tells me her concerns that advice to apply to City university conflicts with what her own research has shown. However, she adds that her parents have no experience of higher education, and this is 'all very new to them', and that her father had dropped out of 'some kind of study' a while ago. The narrative theme is one of confusion and doubt, disrupting the usual assumptions of ease and familiarity. First impressions of the university are formed at her admissions interview, and she tells me that she knew little of what to expect of the process. For Jemima, decision-making is characterised by haphazardness and opportunism.

4.41 At our first interview, Jemima had described the transition from Grayshott Grammar to Winterbourne College as a chance to become self-motivated and to 'grow up' rather than be 'spoon-fed and told what to do'. Her narrative of the university application process presents her choices as made independently of the college, and whilst she admitted that support was available throughout the process, she turned to the Careers Advisor only when she was in despair:

I was like asking him why they were only saying 3 Cs, and I thought that maybe it wasn't such a good course, but he said it was fine.

4.42 In what is a quite powerful contrast, Kate's account is of the close monitoring and steering by Grayshott Grammar. When we first met she had just joined Grayshott Grammar's sixth-form from a secondary school in the state sector:

I'd like to get into banking.....I've heard that there's a good career potential in banking and....I know that there are some courses like at LSE (London School of Economics) that are like the best, but realistically I'm not going somewhere like that. I'm really interested in getting into like business and computers, and I've been told that's where the money is (laughs)....

4.43 Kate's initial thoughts about university are vaguely-defined and without a clear plan. She has some idea that LSE is an elite university, although positions herself outside of that sphere. She has been told that certain subjects may lead to a lucrative career, however there is no sense that she has explored these rather ambiguous ideas further than a general idea of banking as well-paid.

4.44 Over the course of several months, Kate's tutor had worked with her on the personal statement and helped her to define her university options more closely. Like Jemima, Kate's parents had little knowledge of higher education and she described her parents' advice to study Maths in derogatory terms. When Kate receives a predicted C grade after a poor performance in her AS level examination, her tutor suggests a meeting with her parents. Kate told me how her personal tutor persuaded her parents that it would not be in her best interests to apply to study Maths at degree level, and instead he talks to them about alternative undergraduate programmes in 'respectable universities' that will lead towards her chosen career in banking.

4.45 Grayshott Grammar can be seen as making an intervention on behalf of Kate, and negotiating a position that will balance her academic strengths with her parents' expectations. The institution's influence can be seen on one level as supportive, and on this occasion its guidance is consistent with Kate's own wishes. Kate described how the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service - UK) application process is closely monitored and in considerable contrast to Winterbourne College's approach. Whereas Winterbourne College encourages self-reliance and independence, Grayshott Grammar is encouraging its students to surrender active choice making. It is evident that these choices are a negotiation and reconciliation of individual, institutional and family wishes.

4.46 For the students I have described as 'aspiring and vocationally-specific', the relationship between family and higher education is fragile or non-existent. Classified as middle-class through their parents' occupations, it did not follow that the students had access to 'hot knowledge'. These were very obviously outsiders, and in many respects their decision-making process is resonant with representations of working-class young people's approaches. These were not only accounts that conveyed lack of knowledge, but also examples of a habitus that generated fear and uncertainty. In this final group of students, there is very little evidence of their practices resonating with the other students' accounts described in this paper. The narratives are those of students positioned on the outside of the field of higher education, and these are accounts which articulate an impression of higher education as almost beyond their grasp.

Conclusions

5.1 The aim of this article has been to deconstruct the generalised and vague notions of privilege that are presented within the dominant educational 'classed practices' paradigm. The relationship between education and social class is an important and enduring one. Set within the contemporary context of a large and diverse array of higher education provision and a new fees regime, the nature of university participation and its eventual rewards in the labour market assume increasing relevance. Perhaps now the debate is concerned less with whether young people participate in higher education and more with the status of the institution they attend.

5.2 Whilst Bourdieu's conceptual framework has refocused the sociology of education towards the enduring nature of class-based inequalities, it has tended to emphasise the stark inter-class differences. I have attempted to carve a space between representations of privilege and disadvantage and the narratives of university decision-making discussed here illustrate the heterogeneity of middle-class practice.

5.3 Although Bourdieu offers a *sociology of practice*, we hear little from middle-class young people themselves, and so have a limited understanding of the educational practices as they take place. Indeed, their *practices* are reduced to what are undeniably successful *outcomes*. Therefore through this longitudinal research I have collected accounts of middle-class young people's university decisions as they happen over time. Moreover, in hearing the voices of middle-class young people, I have contributed to our understanding of how they accumulate and deploy all that is encapsulated by the term 'hot knowledge' (Reay et al. 2005). That 'hot knowledge' is most powerfully illustrated through the vague and subtle practices of family life and the young people's narratives illustrated how social capital holds the key to access elite universities. Indeed, it is social capital of a very embedded and elusive kind and close proximity to the field of elite universities is misrecognised as confidence and ease for those I characterised as making 'natural, effortless and destined' progressions to university. The relationship of these 'natural, effortless and destined' students to the field of elite universities is rendered all the more powerful by its being already embedded and established from childhood. Their discernment of particular forms of 'hot knowledge' is secondary to an understanding that they are, in effect, already a part of the field. Indeed, the 'hot knowledge' is like a golden thread, tightly and imperceptibly woven into the fabric of their everyday lives.

Notes

¹A levels are qualifications which are generally studied full-time over two-years and provide young people with access to university.

²In the UK, private schools are fee-paying institutions where students most commonly attend as 'day students'.

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