Images of excellence: constructions of institutional prestige and reflections in the university choice process

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Here, the narratives of a group of non-traditional students who entered traditional UK universities are examined. A number of participants felt there was a kind of romance or exotic quality to the sights, sounds and smells of traditional institutions, which constituted part of the attraction. The process of becoming a student at an elite or traditional institution involved an oscillation between anxiety and ambition. Occasionally, students would become disillusioned with particular traditional universities, usually due to an act of rudeness—for example, a 'snotty letter' that deflected them. Yet their choices remained within the traditional sector. The participants subscribe to what Bourdieu called the 'doxa' or the largely unwritten rules of the overall game. The results confirm the recent interest in intra-class differences and affirm the need to make sense of how individuals' habituses can be transformed to accommodate the changes accompanying the move to university.

Introduction

There has been much interest in choice of higher education institutions (HEIs) by students and whether different constituencies in the student body enter different types of HEI. Race (Ball *et al.*, 2002a, b; Reay *et al.*, 2001a), gender (David *et al.*, 2003), previous educational institution (Reay *et al.*, 2001b; Ball *et al.*, 2002b; David *et al.*, 2003), social class (Reay *et al.*, 2001a, 2005; Ball *et al.*, 2002a; Brooks, 2003, 2005), the influence of peers (Brooks, 2003) and the involvement and influence of parents (Brooks, 2003; David *et al.*, 2003) are all factors that have been explored.

We will unpick the question of university 'choice' from the point of view of people who have undertaken higher education (HE) in the past two decades and explore some of the ideas, images and normative beliefs involved. There has been a remarkable lack of attention to the imagery surrounding university choice and how it

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intersects with questions of culture, economic privilege and socio-demographic division that usually inform research on access to HE. Our participants' narratives will be explored with a view to identifying points of intersection with the existing debates, but we also open up new lines of enquiry.

The establishment of the post-1992 universities, the publication of university league tables and the ability of a variety of other institutions to now offer degree courses has led to a variety of choice for potential degree students. For many this is a structured choice, with the new universities being perceived as less prestigious (Brennan & Shah, 2003). These constructions of prestige in the institutions' images intersect with changes in the recruitment policies of some universities that are alleged to have become increasingly selective (Henry, 2005). 'Non-traditional' students are defined by Morey *et al.* (2003) in terms of their being from segments of the population who have previously been under-represented in HE, such as mature students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, first-generation undergraduates, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities. These groups are less likely to have obtained the United Kingdom's 16–18 academic qualification of 'A'-levels. These students are more likely to end up in the less prestigious institutions (Reay *et al.*, 2001a, 2005). In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that between 9% and 14% of undergraduates at prestigious establishments such as Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College are from working-class households, whereas the comparably sized new university at Luton boasts a 40% working-class undergraduate complement (Thompson, 2004).

The UK HE system is characterised by progressively deepening divisions between institutions in terms of cultural and educational prestige, finance, resources and the level of privilege enjoyed by their students (Utley, 2004). The question of student 'choice' and how it is made becomes particularly crucial, set against the backdrop of the public image of different kinds of universities.

Ball *et al.* (2002a) identified two types of HE 'chooser', the 'embedded' and the 'contingent' chooser. These can be thought of as 'discourses of choice'. The embedded chooser is associated with a middle-class background and a family history of HE, and HE is expected to be part of the individual's trajectory. The contingent chooser is associated with a working-class background and no family history of HE. Embedded choosers view the status of HEIs as being important and draw on diverse types of information when choosing. The contingent chooser does not recognise the status decisions between old and new universities, or sees them as insignificant, and chooses their HEI on the basis of very limited information. They rely heavily for information from prospectuses and websites and a few significant others for recommendations or warnings. Ball *et al.* (2002a) argued that embedded choosers are more likely than contingent choosers to apply to and enter the 'traditional' universities.

Ball *et al.* (2002b) argued that selection of HEI is one way in which the middle classes reproduce their social advantage in HE. As choices are infused with class and ethnic meanings, Ball *et al.* refer to 'social class in the head'. Ball *et al.* (2002b) maintain that the idea of 'choice' assumes an equality masking real inequality, and that HE choices are embedded in different 'opportunity structures'. In support of this

position, a study by the Open University's Centre for Education Research and Information (Brennan & Shah, 2003) suggests that students from less advantaged backgrounds struggle to enter HE of any kind.

Scholars interested in intra-class difference argue that the middle and working classes are not homogeneous groups (Brooks, 2003, 2005; Bottero, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2005) and some have examined the heterogeneity within social classes in their choice of HEI, arguing that the situation is far more complex than 'contingent' and 'embedded' choosers being found among the working and middle classes, respectively (Brooks, 2005; Reay *et al.*, 2005).

In the light of this and literature suggesting that 'non-traditional' students often find 'elite' and 'traditional' universities alienating, hostile or unwelcoming (Archer & Hutchings, 2000), we report a study of the narratives of 14 'non-traditional' students and examine their recollections of how they chose a place to study for their first degree at either traditional or elite universities. The process of choice was often informed by a diverse suite of characteristics that have rather tenuous links with the substantive issue of course quality.

In understanding university choice, the work of Pierre Bourdieu is particularly apposite (see, *inter alia*, Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Fowler, 1997). The notion of *habitus* is introduced by Bourdieu to deal with this kind of problem. In Bourdieu's account, *habitus* is the 'product' of socialisation and cultural induction in particular institutional settings characterised by material inequalities in power relations. Yet what is *produced* is not merely a passive replica of a dominant ideology but rather a *generative principle*, a disposition towards one's experience within the fields of practice that the actor must address (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 52–53). It embraces culture, imagery and historically predisposed means of understanding the world as well as patterns of action and conduct. Although some of these ideas have been received critically (for example, Mouzelis, 1995, pp. 100–116; Sayer, 1999), the notion of *habitus* helps to characterise and resolve some of the apparent paradoxes that interest us. The field of university choice is one that students, their families, teachers and lecturers engage with actively and creatively (Power *et al.*, 2003). That engagement does not happen entirely *de novo* and the educational field is not just plastic to the participants' will: it imposes limits. In other words: ' … the *habitus*, like every "art of inventing" is what makes it possible to produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable … but also limited in their diversity' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55).

It is vital to the sociological understanding of HE choices that that we develop an account of the moral and strategic stances (*'prise de position'*) that actors may assume, which permit certain forms of improvisation while inhibiting or disallowing others where educational choices are concerned.

Another of Bourdieu's key terms that seems pertinent to the exploration of sensibilities about university choice and university prestige is his notion of 'doxa', or the participant's 'commitment to the presuppositions' of the game that they are playing (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66), an 'undisputed, pre-reflexive, naïve, native compliance' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68) that gives us our 'feel' for what is, among other things,

intuitively proper, fair, excellent or prestigious. Bourdieu adds that competitors in political power struggles often seek to appropriate 'the sayings of the tribe' (doxa) and thereby to appropriate 'the power the group exercises over itself' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 110; Wacquant, 1999). Hence universities in their advertising promote themselves as 'leading', 'excellent', 'quality' or, even more demotically, offering a 'brilliant student lifestyle'. We believe that close attention to participants' narratives will provide valuable windows into how the symbolic capitals of choice are creatively re-constructed and have important implications for how university choice is conceived.

Methodology

The materials reported here were selected from a group of 13 individuals who met Morey *et al*.'s (2003) criteria for 'non-traditional' students for a range of reasons. Participants ranged from 22 to 55 years of age. All but one had entered university since 1992. Many of the sample discussed here had studied at the University of Wales, Bangor and had been raised in north Wales. Table 1 presents the participants' gender, the reasons why they were classed as a non-traditional student, the subject studied and university attended while studying for their first degree.

All of the participants had successfully completed at least one degree. Some had 'stable' backgrounds but did not enter university for various reasons when younger. Others had experienced considerable deprivation, marginalisation or negative events in their lives. A good deal of existing literature concentrates on urban disadvantage. Our sample differs in that our respondents had experienced rural deprivation. A majority of participants were from Wales, having grown up in a culture rather

Table 1.   Participants in the study

Participant	Gender	Category of non-traditional student	Subject studied; university attended
Sara	Female	Working class	Ancient history; Oxford
Mike	Male	Mature, no 'A'-levels	Psychology; Bangor
Anne	Female	Working class	Medicine; Dundee
Rob	Male	Working class, mature	Psychology; Brunel
Hefin	Male	Working class	History; Durham
Clara	Female	Working class, mature	Business studies; Bangor
Corinne	Female	Working class	Social anthropology; Cambridge
Jo	Female	Working class, mature, no 'A'-levels, ethnic minority	Business studies; Bangor
Mary	Female	Mature, no 'A'-levels	History; Bangor
Toni	Female	Working class, no 'A'-levels	Law; Liverpool
Eryl	Male	Working class	Theology; Bangor
Megan	Female	Working class	Geography; Aberystwyth
Delyth	Female	Working class, mature, no 'A'-levels	Social studies; Bangor
Eirlys	Female	Mature, no 'A'-levels	Social studies; Bangor

different from that found elsewhere in the United Kingdom, although most showed features that would be described in England as 'working class'. They were usually the first people in the family to experience HE. Some of our respondents considered that they had climbed out of deprivation at a relatively young age, simply by attending university, and others resembled the mature students found in the existing literature.

The participants were employed in a range of occupations, including personal assistants, housing officers and healthcare professionals, or were working in research and academia. Participants were approached via a snowball sampling technique among people already known to the first author, who were asked to introduce other people who might be interested in the study.

By interviewing non-traditional students who have chosen to study at traditional universities we have an atypical example. If one uses the idea of 'social class in the head', some of these students could be described as being middle class who have ended up in the 'non-traditional' category. Some others, however, were, by any standards, disadvantaged. The idiosyncracies of the sample will be considered in the analysis.

People were requested not to give details of their own interview to people that they introduced, merely to ask them whether they would be willing to take part in a study exploring factors thought to be important when choosing a university.

The interviews for the present study adopted an open-ended approach that was a modified form of the autobiographical interviewing method of Chamberlayne *et al.* (2000), where the researcher begins with a single question and subsequently encourages elaboration. These interviews began with the question 'what made you choose the university where you did your first degree?' and then proceeded with the participant leading and the interviewer seeking clarification and elaboration, seeking information as to how the choice of university had been made and the basis of that choice.

The analysis proceeded in line with Chamberlayne *et al.*'s (2000) recommendations, by discussion of the interviews on a case by case basis among a broader research team from the researcher's host department, with a view to identifying themes and pivotal moments in the process of choice. The notes and records of these discussions formed a further layer of data for analysis. The analysis was also informed by the issues raised in the background literature concerning the types of identities, interpretive repertoires and narrative forms that helped understand how choice is constructed and constrained by the participants.

The analytic strategy was informed by the insight from previous literature that there might be distinct forms of choice strategy, or that choice may be constrained or informed by the economic and social location of participants.

Results and discussion

Participants gave a wide range of reasons for choosing their particular university. This was striking, even considering the heterogeneity of the sample, although consistent themes were evident. The most striking difference between our own data and that presented in other studies such as Archer and Hutchings (2000) was the relative

absence of reports of feeling alienated by aspects of 'elite' or 'traditional' institutions. We consider 'elite' and 'traditional' universities together here because, although there are differences between these categories of institution, it is both these, rather than the post-1992 universities, that are usually charged with alienating non-traditional students.

The analysis sought to discover why it was that here elitism and prestige did not have their usual mantle of exclusion and snobbery. The kinds of comments made could be grouped into five themes.

The romance of tradition

Some saw the institutions as representing an otherworldly experience. Corinne, from a large lone-parent family whose mother had subsisted on welfare benefits throughout her childhood, recalled her impressions at interview of Kings College, Cambridge:

> it was like a fairytale castle … to me it looked like Narnia, it was all snowy … like when you walk through the wardrobe and its Narnia …

Indeed, where 'awe' occurred, it seemed more to do with the accommodation itself rather than encountering a hostile institutional habitus:

> I was quite overawed by it … they said to me what do you think of Cambridge? And I said my room's got an en suite bathroom and I think that really entertained them. So I was quite overawed by it all, but it was exciting more than daunting … (Corinne)

This image is striking in that it did not occur in the context of connotations of elitism, or a hostile, exclusive traditionalism, but is reminiscent of what Lin (2003, p. 121) calls 'tropes of the exotic', where the exotic 'otherness' of different cultures delimits a cultural boundary. Like the westerners in Edward Said's (1979) discussion of Orientalism, the university is alien yet beautiful and fascinating. This was echoed by another participant:

> I was working for [a menswear store] in Bangor … when I went upstairs … you could see out of the window up to the university building and I used to think wow such a nice building … the high street would always be full of students having a good laugh and I thought there's got to be something more than working in [the menswear store]. (Mike)

The aesthetics of architecture also features in the desire to attend this particular institution. The culture of the place and the jollity of the students add to its apparent attraction. The sense of age conveyed by some institutions was also remarked upon. One respondent, who also studied at Bangor, remembered equating physical features of the university with an elite institution and academic excellence:

> I really liked the fact that it seemed like a very old traditional university … I liked the smell of the corridors on the open day. I liked the old art work. I liked its history, it made me feel that I was joining a university with a lot of history, a lot of expertise … it made me feel that the degree that I'd be getting at the end would be better than say [a nearby college], an ex-poly … I almost linked it with Oxford or Cambridge … a huge library [laughs] but I was totally ignorant of what the library was about … (Clara)

Other participants attending the same institution were also attracted to traditional-looking buildings:

> I went into the main arts building … that to me looked really attractive and motivated me … I had a feel that I'd be happy here because I like historic buildings … (Jo)

What is at stake here is the image of the past and what it connotes in terms of learning. It is an inviting suite of images and it is here that the 'doxa' of history, learning and tradition are mobilised most effectively so that the students see themselves as in need of what the institution has to offer. We stress here that we are discussing the participant's perceptions of an institution—whether Bangor is an elite, academically excellent institution is not the issue. The salient fact is that these participants' images of Bangor were of elitism and excellence.

This 'aesthetic of tradition' was apparent in other accounts of choosing this university, but it applied to the town as well, by means of a kind of halo effect:

> it was the look of Bangor, actually as a mature student I was more concerned with where I'd be living for a period of time—the aesthetic of Bangor … (Jo)

Another respondent had similar feelings about Durham:

> just stepping off the train and seeing the city … it is a beautiful city … very much historic … (Hefin)

It is as if the image of history and tradition is endorsing the prestige of the place. A 'new university' would have an uphill struggle to establish itself against this accumulated sense of tradition that has added weight to the desirability of particular institutions.

The 'proper' university

The participants might well be expected to say they had felt at home with the traditional institutions they had attended since they were self-selecting to a large extent, and had actively chosen to attend them. There was a sense that features associated with elite universities made the experience more valuable. Another respondent described how, after deciding against an Open University degree, she felt that Bangor had academic credibility and that this was important:

> I wanted a course at a proper university … it was the University of Wales, Bangor and … you can't compare that to the Open University …

and

> you've got the library there, you've got the facilities, which helps to feel that you are doing a degree … (Mary)

Another factor that seemed to add to the image of this university being credible, a 'proper' university in Mary's eyes, were the memories that she had of people in her community that had gone to university when she had been younger and unable to do so herself:

when you heard about people going to university they went to Bangor …

Despite the status of Bangor as a 'traditional' university, the esteem in which the various departments and courses were held by participants was variable. For some it was a matter not just of choosing a 'proper' university, but also gaining access to a course that was equally prestigious. Mike remarked:

I was put off by Bangor because I'd heard that a lot of the departments were clearing departments … I wasn't overly convinced by the quality of the institution … but it had to be local …

His worries regarding the possible question of the university's status were partly compensated for by his subsequent realisation that one of the courses that he was able to apply for was in a 'high-status' department by national standards. He remembered choosing his particular course:

my preferred option was the one I was least likely to get … a balancing act … I was lucky to get onto a good quality course … I perceived that if they were easy to get onto they probably weren't very valuable …

Such a 'balancing act', in which a student negotiates to obtain a place on the highest status course possible, even in an HEI that they do not feel is prestigious, assuming that such a course is more worthy because it is more difficult to secure a place on, has been noted by Brooks (2003) and Power *et al.* (2003).

Feeling 'like a yokel': awareness of social and cultural divides

Some participants identified a different, sometimes alien, culture to the institutions they visited and subsequently attended:

I came for my interview in my little shop uniform … with my little name badge … I felt little thick me going to that big university … [my friend] Gwawr could hardly speak a word of English … we did feel like yokels … there was a lot of students with money … all there with mummy and daddy … it wasn't enough to put me off … but … I did feel very intimidated in the interview. (Clara)

Although some of the people Clara met on this open day and interview reinforced her awareness of the gulf between her social background and theirs, she did subsequently accept a place at this university and succeeded academically and, in her view, socially. Intriguingly, despite the enduring impression of social difference at the first encounter, Clara persisted with the experience and worked her way through it.

An example including a kind of strategy for achieving this neutralisation of the perceived gulf emerged from another participant:

… started to dawn on me coming from a strong working class area … the accents … you think 'who are these types, do they actually exist?' … you've just got to have a sense of humour and laugh … you can spot them a mile off … (Hefin)

This student, from a very deprived town in Wales, who applied to and entered an elite English university, seemed to view some types of behaviour with amusement, rather

than feel alienated. Perhaps he was able to do this because of his confidence academically—he talked of not feeling intimidated by more privileged students because he had obtained his place 'on ability', which confirmed his feelings of worth among the academic community.

Mike intended to go to his local university yet he was 'concerned' about its reputation. The interviewer (S.B.) pointed out that this was not the only choice and a nearby further education college also offered the opportunity to study for degrees, in conjunction with a new university. He had an interesting response:

> I would have been hesitant to have to study at an institution like that … (Mike)

It was thus clear from Mike's initial claim that he had to go to Bangor as it was 'the only choice locally' and his subsequent response to the idea of doing a degree at the further education college—that a degree at a further education college was not an option. This is a very similar response to Ball *et al.*'s (2002b) privately educated participants, who simply did not consider applying to new universities.

The dialectic of ambition and terror: Sara's story

One particular participant's story illustrates another theme in the narratives. These were not simple tales of triumph and confidence amidst idyllic architecture. It is important to be aware that the sense of being out of one's depth often intertwines with themes of ambition and defeat is permanently poised to be snatched from the jaws of victory. In Sara's story, 'going to Oxford' is presented as involving an initial sense of terror:

> … it was bizarre, it was surreal, there was all these medieval cloisters … I was terrified in those interviews … in these book-lined rooms and I didn't come from a house with books in or anything medieval at all. (Sara)

There are many references in the literature of non-traditional students' negative images and experiences of, and alienation from, prestigious universities (for example, Reay 2003). Such negativity is often associated with a perception of an institution being 'upper-class' or 'snobbish' and non-traditional students often feel alienated if they perceive an institution in this way (Ball *et al.*, 2002b). Sara's remarks exemplify the kinds of references that were made by our participants to factors that may have led to an institution, or people within it, being seen as 'snooty'. This is identified as being related to the architecture—the cloisters, the presumed Medieval date of the establishment—or the books. Thus, the architectural features that are often a source of pleasure and connote quality, also have a minatory effect.

Brooks (2002) records non-traditional students particularly aiming for entry to traditional or elite institutions. There was a contingent among our participants who expressed a clear attraction to the idea of entering a university that was 'good', or 'the best'. Sara showed this desire fervently:

> the reason I chose them [prestigious universities] was at the time I was … expected to get straight A's … teachers said oh this girl definitely goes and I think it was the head of 6th

> form, he put the idea into my head … I think it was that … I had a very competitive and ambitious streak …
>
> I had this idea that I could go far and I had a lot of confidence, but I was very academic …

She remembered a teacher saying at a parents' evening that:

> … 'she should easily be able to go to university, she could even go to Oxford' … it just germinated … I wanted to sort of show off and I wanted to show that I could go to the best university …

In the event her 'A'-level grades turned out to be insufficient so she reapplied the following year:

> the next year I didn't bother with any other universities, I just applied to Oxford … it's quite interesting that I did only apply to Oxford, although I hadn't done well in my 'A' levels.

It was not entirely clear where the ideas had come from:

> my ideas came almost entirely from myself … I was competitive and I was ambitious … if I was going to go, I wanted to go to the best … just wanted to do it to show that I could really … I think it was a lot about proving I was clever … there was a couple of professional people around, my father's vet, who were quite impressed and he said gosh.

With no knowledge of HE in her family, Sara remembered asking a middle-class woman for whom her mother worked as a cleaner for advice about her Oxford interview. As she said:

> I think I was a little bit aware that I wouldn't fit in …

Some of the literature alludes to a world very different from that familiar to non-traditional students, suggesting that this world causes serious problems for them. George and Gillon (2001, p. 16) talk of 'an alienating, not merely an alien, world'. Sara's account is formulated in and through the sense of ambition that she had as the teenage daughter of a rural Somerset family, none of whom had entered HE and many of whom had left school at 14 to work in farming. Her ambition is formulated in terms of a desire to 'prove herself', but she did not speculate about where such powerful drives were coming from.

The 'snotty letter': disjunctures of class, ethos and worldview

Among our informants there were techniques of neutralisation whereby the perceived 'snobbery' of some institutions and the risk it represented could be deflected.

One participant, a very able woman who grew up on a large Scottish council estate, read medicine and explicitly stated that she had did not consider applying to Edinburgh because it is 'snooty'. She remembered feeling angry after receiving a letter of conditional acceptance from one medical school:

> [Glasgow] sent me a really snotty letter … I thought 'stuff you, I do things because I want to do things, not because you want me to jump through hoops' … (Anne)

She subsequently rejected the offer of that place and accepted another elsewhere, on the grounds that:

> a lot of it was to do with size and being more modern in its approach … not so much up its own arse …

Another participant also rejected a university place as a result of perceived rudeness. Rob, who entered university as a mature student, remembered feeling insulted when he reported an admissions tutor saying:

> 'Do you think you'll be able to cope with all these young bright students?' … I made sure that I got the place there and then I rejected it … why would you want to go to a place that didn't think you were on an equal level with the rest of the students …

The same participant remembered institutional snobbery being exhibited at another interview:

> I was told 'you do realise how lucky you are to be at the University of Manchester … if you were to go for a job and you were shortlisted with people from Salford or Manchester Met, all other things being equal, you would get the job because you were at the University of Manchester' … I'd never even actually thought about that.

Some of our participants referred to a variety of features that they did not like, 'snottyness', 'snootyness' or rudeness, but they usually had enough confidence to deal with this. Another participant disparagingly referred to such institutional snobbery:

> All this stuff you hear about league tables … I wasn't interested, I don't subscribe to it … I find that snobbery just a bit pathetic to be honest … (Toni)

This was the only reference to league tables that any participant made. Unlike Brooks' (2005) informants, our participants did not articulate interest in published league table positions.

Participants display a kind of rejection of the values they perceived to be espoused via snobbery, inhospitable institutional habitus and indicators of prestige. However, they have not escaped the 'doxa'—the shared pre-suppositions or the rules of the game—although they are offering alternative strategies or ways of understanding the world. The world constructed is one they see to be constrained by attitudinal and interpersonal values. Social class is very much 'in the head' (Ball *et al.*, 2002b). It is demonstrated in these accounts but certainly not mentioned in terms of material inequalities and differences in economic and political privilege that divide the HE sector. The moral and strategic stance, the '*prise de position*' is formulated in interpersonal terms.

General discussion

The material here is reminiscent of earlier literature, in that traditional institutions may have intimidating or inhospitable features, often described in terms of 'snotty' or 'snobbish' demeanour. Yet it is clear that some of the features of traditional institutions, especially the architecture, yield an exotic, fictionalised or other-worldly feel. It

is attractive but nevertheless powerfully intertwined with notions of academic quality and higher learning. These images of excellence are drawn on with remarkable alacrity, as if they were an entirely natural way to understand learning.

Our non-traditional students, unlike non-traditional 'contingent choosers' (Ball *et al.*, 2002a), had often actively emphasised the importance of going to 'the best' institutions, or at least institutions that somehow were reminiscent of the elite universities.

The sense of alienation at elite institutions, or the contingent repertoire of choosing an institution, is not inevitably debilitating or demotivating for non-traditional students. The habitus here is sufficiently elastic and creative to permit the creation of new forms of institutional and self experience. Clara and Sara seem to be reflexively 'writing their own biographies' as individualised, de-traditionalised participants, in a manner reminiscent of Beck (1992). They are consciously, actively breaking away from their social backgrounds. Other participants could be described as writing their own biographies, but had greater allegiances with the values and people of their previous communities. If we are to utilise Ball *et al.*'s (2002b) concept of 'social class in the head', in a sense Clara and Sara had changed theirs to a greater extent than the others.

As non-traditional students, or 'lucky survivors' (Bourdieu, 1988), the participants are unrepresentative of their original peer groups, exceptional in their trajectories and aspirations (Ball *et al.*, 2002b)—particularly for our participants, having gone to traditional or elite universities, sometimes after very difficult experiences. Sara's narrative demonstrates this is not straightforward, involving an interplay of terror yet an assemblage of fragments of evidence that significant people were perceived to support. Robbins (1991, p. 6) observes that 'students have become self-selectively homogenized' and that 'the social ethos of students and institutions are mutually reinforcing'. Here the process is one that is artfully constructed from minute fragments and subsequently elevated to the status of a mutually reinforcing experience. Ball *et al.* (2002b) remarked that some choices are only made possible by certain levels of attainment. Had Anne, Corinne and Sara in our study not been so academically able, a place to study medicine, or entry to Oxbridge, would have been unthinkable. Even for these high-achieving women, very different considerations obtained. Anne actively rejected Glasgow after the 'snotty letter' and went elsewhere. Sara's narrative reflects an ambivalent and dialectical relationship with the elite institution in her quest to show that she was 'the best'. Corinne circumvented this process and instead attended to the fairytale aspect of the university, yet like most good fairytales it was acutely attuned to the gradients of status and cultural capital at stake.

Ball *et al.* (2000b) maintain that cultural and social capital, material constraints, social perceptions and distinctions and forms of self-exclusion all play a part in the process of 'choosing' an HEI. As Ball *et al.* (2002b) argued, simple structural class analysis cannot readily be sustained, yet students have a realistic if sometimes allegorically framed grasp of the material differences in status and cultural capital between themselves as applicants and the prestige of the institutions to which they had applied.

As Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) theorised, decision-making was embedded in family background, culture and life-histories. Ball *et al.* (2002b) discuss the 'institutional habitus' effect on choice of HE describing how 'classificatory judgements' are most obvious in relation to perceptions of what is unacceptable. This was clear among our respondents who wanted a 'proper' university or expressed concern about the 'quality' of courses or institutions. Discussion regarding such quality of education was confined to exactly that—no-one expressed that this 'quality' would lead to high-status employment.

Our respondents did not see HE as too 'risky' (Archer & Hutchings, 2000); instead, they were mostly people who were taking risks involved in choosing and changing their social identities, some very obviously so (Beck, 1992). Ball *et al.* (2002b) suggest that the difference between those individuals who do this and those who do not may rest on differences between individualist and solidarist fractions of the working class, although a few of our respondents could be described as middle class. Beck (1992, p. 98) suggests 'a new inequality', 'the inequality of dealing with insecurity and reflexivity'; and Ball *et al.* (2002b) suggests that this inequality differs between class and class fractions. Our ambitious participants felt the effects of such inequality and the insecurity it brings with it—they were 'terrified' and 'intimidated' at interviews, they noticed other students 'with money' and they felt like 'yokels', yet they also described a gradual mastery of the new identity. At the outset there was much uncertainty. The student who remembered applying to Cambridge as 'a nice exciting little adventure', attributed her lack of anxiety over the whole process to the fact that she 'didn't really think it was going to happen'.

Conclusion

This study emphasises the heterogeneity of non-traditional students as well as intra-class differences, and we would agree with Reay *et al.* (2005) that students show different priorities in relation to risk, challenge, and developing a sense of fitting in. Many students show that taste and lifestyle enter into the equation when choosing an HEI and, as Brooks (2003) found, some students are actively aspiring to different kinds of habitus, leveraged upwards on images of excellence that emphasise tradition, quality and academic integrity that many new universities would be hard pressed to match. Although Brooks (2003) maintains that transformations of habitus are not commonplace, a number of our participants seem to have been trying to achieve this. Sometimes it begins through attachments to brief apercus, such as through fleeting contact with people perceived to be middle class, or pin-sharp recollections of the sights, sounds and even the smells of institutions perceived as prestigious.

For both the development of theory and to advance widening access policies, we need to understand how these images of excellence come to have their power to wrench people into new biographic alignments. Perhaps this is best achieved through Bourdieu's insight that no matter where people are in the system, they may still subscribe to the 'doxa' or rules of the game—in this case a symbolic armamentarium of success, whose power is only just beginning to be understood in educational

processes. A successful widening access policy, and individual institution marketing, needs to be geared to the moral and strategic stances taken by students. This needs to go beyond merely making themselves 'user friendly', needing to mesh with the potential students and their families commitments to the presuppositions of the 'rules of the game'. The research reported here also highlights that commitments to presuppositions take different forms in different families.

In this atypical sample, some of our students could be described as middle-class non-traditional students with middle-class orientations to the notion of good and bad HEIs. Others, from very disadvantaged backgrounds, have adopted a middle-class disposition towards HE and have made a substantive endorsement of the concept of 'good' universities. This raises questions about the habitus of such students—in their interviews there was no 'denial' of their origins, but they developed a habitus allowing them to move into social enclaves that were very different to their experience as children.

Our results suggest that there is substantial social reproduction in the current HE system. But the picture is more complex. The term 'non-traditional student' is problematic, encompassing a diverse range of people. Some non-traditional students come from families who are middle class and some are from families that have experienced considerable deprivation but have 'middle-class' strategic dispositions to education. Equally, some non-traditional students consider league tables, academic snobbery or social class differences generally as irrelevant.

Our 'lucky survivors', despite some of them being so ambitious and tenacious and overcoming personal challenges, still demonstrate that the kind of 'equality' that some believe now presides in HE does indeed mask 'the effects of real inequality' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 76). Our participants were constrained, either financially or emotionally or simply in terms of knowledge about HE, in ways that many traditional students, particularly those with a family history of HE, would not be.

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