



‘Strangers in Paradise’? Working-class Students in Elite Universities

- **Diane Reay**
University of Cambridge
- **Gill Crozier**
Roehampton University
- **John Clayton**
University of Sunderland

ABSTRACT

This article draws on case studies of nine working-class students at Southern, an elite university.¹ It attempts to understand the complexities of identities in flux through Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field. Bourdieu (1990a) argues that when an individual encounters an unfamiliar field, habitus is transformed. He also writes of how the movement of habitus across new, unfamiliar fields results in ‘a habitus divided against itself’ (Bourdieu, 1999a). Our data suggest more nuanced understandings in which the challenge of the unfamiliar results in a range of creative adaptations and multi-faceted responses. They display dispositions of self-scrutiny and self-improvement – almost ‘a constant fashioning and re-fashioning of the self’ but one that still retains key valued aspects of a working-class self. Inevitably, however, there are tensions and ambivalences, and the article explores these, as well as the very evident gains for working-class students of academic success in an elite HE institution.

KEY WORDS

elite universities / habitus / working-class students

Introduction

Between 2002 and 2006 the proportion of working-class students in UK universities declined slightly, despite government pressure to increase their numbers. The percentage fell between 2005 and 2006 from 28.6 per cent to 28.2 per cent (Blair, 2006). Over the same period Southern University's state school admissions dropped to 57.9 per cent, while its percentage of students from low-income families fell to 12.4. Since then there has been a further fall in the proportion of students from low-income families both at UK universities in general and at Southern in particular (Frean, 2007; Grimston, 2009; Pallis, 2008; Paton, 2007). It is against this background that our ESRC TLRP research project² has been conducted and the focus of this article is on a group we have called 'strangers in paradise', nine working-class students³ in an elite English university (although as will become clearer through the course of this article in a number of ways the working-class students are not strangers nor, for the most part, would they perceive themselves to be 'in paradise').

These nine students, all highly academically successful, present a particular challenge for commonsense connotations of working class with 'average' or 'low' ability and indifferent educational attainment (Weis, 1990; Willis, 1977). None of the parents of the nine students have been to university themselves, although one father, now retired, has started a business studies course at a new university. The parents of the students are employed in a range of manual and service occupations including car sprayer, building labourer, merchant seaman, child minder, cleaner and mechanic. Four of the students are studying law (Nicole, Linsey, Jude and Jamie), two are studying history (Chloe and Jim), one English (Owen) and the other two, Engineering (Amy and Louise). Of the nine students, eight started university at 18 or a year later. The one mature student, Chloe, was in her mid-20s when she began her course.

Working-class Habitus in the Field of Higher Education: Fish out of Water?

In this article we have drawn on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, as well as making reference to cultural capital. There are three main forms of capital: – economic, cultural and social – and, for Bourdieu (1986: 242), the distribution of capitals among individuals determines the chances of success for practices. Although cultural capital may be acquired it flows from habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 94), which Bourdieu defines as a complex interplay between past and present. He writes that habitus 'refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history' (1993: 86). Individual histories therefore are vital to understanding the concept of habitus. At the same time, habitus are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them (Reay, 2004). Current circumstances are not just there to be acted upon, but are

internalized and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socializations (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 134).

Therefore, although the habitus is a product of early childhood experience, and, in particular, socialization within the family, it is continually modified by individuals' encounters with the outside world (Di Maggio, 1979). Schooling, in particular, can act to provide a general disposition, a turn towards what Bourdieu terms 'a cultured habitus' (1967: 344). This process of educational socialization has proved particularly effective for the working-class students in our sample, who, despite coming from families lacking in both economic and dominant cultural capital, have all achieved at least three As at A-level. However, as becomes evident later in the article, the working-class students' turn towards a cultured habitus was not due, in the main part, to the strong support and active mentoring of their teachers. Rather, it was predominantly work on and of the self.

While habitus brings into focus the subjective, field focuses on the objective (Grenfell and James, 1998). This can produce a powerful synergy in which:

... social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127)

However, when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty (Reay, 2005). Working-class habitus in an elite university is a good example of this latter case. Sani (2008) argues that the mismatch between high-status university and a low-status social background produces a dearth of opportunities for self-affirmation at university, creating tension and unease. A recent study on the social mobility costs of attending university found working-class students at elite universities faced a number of dilemmas that their middle-class counterparts at elite universities and working-class students at new universities did not have to confront (Jetten et al., 2008). Such dilemmas include the ability to maintain connections to one's social background, including family, friends and the wider community.

However, our first surprise was that, in working-class Southern students' accounts of their own experience, this rarely seemed to be the case. There was not 'the disconnection from family and cultural backgrounds' that Wentworth and Peterson (2001:10) identify when describing the university experience of working-class students. Rather, they displayed the ability to successfully move across two very different fields, combining strong connections and loyalties to family and home friends with what are seen to be classically middle-class academic dispositions, a versatility that most had begun to develop in early schooling. This we suggest is because these students had already begun to engage in processes of self-conscious reflexivity (McNay, 2008) in which self-awareness and a propensity for self-improvement become incorporated into the habitus.

Their reports of early school experiences reveal a sense of being a ‘fish out of water’ among their working-class peer group. As Jim said ‘I never ever fitted in’. We would suggest such experiences, as the later example of Jude illustrates, jolted these students out of ‘any sense of pre-reflexive ease and led to an acute sense of self-consciousness’ (Crossley, 2001: 158).

There was little evidence of middle-class cultural practices such as out-of-school dance, drama, art and music lessons or private tuition (Lareau, 2003; Reay, 1998), and only two of the students reported that their parents had ‘middle-class’-type aspirations in relation to their education. For students like Linsey the field appears to generate disincentives as well as incentives. While Linsey remained strongly embedded in family life throughout her three years at Southern, she reports that her mother, in particular, continued to have reservations about her being there:

My parents were quite anti-university. Neither of them went and so kind of, it was like they didn’t go, so they don’t think you have to. My mum’s still quite against it, she doesn’t like me talking about it at all. It’s like, you can’t mention Southern. Don’t, just don’t go there. I try not to, but if something’s happened, you’re like, you want to mention it.

The schools they attended were predominantly state comprehensives with average and slightly above average GCSE results (the range was 53 to 66%), with only one of the nine students (Amy) attending a high performing grammar school. Certainly the impression most of the students convey is that their schooling did not provide easy access to forms of dominant cultural capital sanctioned and recognized by the educational system:

I was really glad I went to the FE College. But I mean essentially it does things like bricklaying and hairdressing and a few A-levels. So I mean it’s not the place where normally where you’d, like a lot of my friends didn’t even go to university at all. (Louise)

I went to a comprehensive school which finishes at 16 and so I had to do my A-levels at an FE College because my school didn’t have a sixth form ... and I’d say out of my class at school, 30 of us, say 10 people maybe are now at university. A lot of us became, for example, electricians or plumbers, and they looked at trades as opposed to going the academic route. (Jude)

So secondary schooling did not provide easy access to dominant cultural capital but neither did the students’ predominantly working-class localities. Jude, a first-year law student, tells an anecdote to illustrate his strong feelings from an early age that he was always, to an extent, out of place in his home locality:

I used to collect money with the milk man. When I was about 13, yeah, cuz my family was friends with the milkman and I remember just a kid ask, a kid saying ‘you’re a swot at school aren’t you?’ and I was just knocking on someone’s door and I said ‘yes’. There was no point in hiding it. And he said ‘why? you’re meant to go on the dole’ ... and I said ‘I don’t want to do that!’ and he said ‘but you’re meant to do that.’ But I don’t look at it like that.

Whereas we would want to recognize the reflexive, situated, self-constructed nature of interview talk, especially in the personally meaningful contexts that the students were trying to make sense of, Jude's version of his childhood vividly illuminates the lack of fit between the field of the local working-class environment and his already evolving habitus. We can see the dissonance between the feel for the game and the game itself (Bourdieu, 1990b). Jude eschews a future of school failure and male adult unemployment common in the area he grew up in. Rather, what both he and Linsey report is a prioritizing of academic work that was common across all the Southern working-class students. Putting academic success first for these students often entailed avoiding those groups in school that were perceived to be less committed to learning, and where such groups constituted the majority in their schools, students described experiences of exclusion, sometimes self-imposed, from mainstream peer groups.

There is evidence of resilience and an ability to cope with adversity. Like the students in Robb et al.'s (2007) study, a strong theme was students' reflections of having faced disadvantage, and difficult challenges, to which they had adapted successfully. As we have discussed earlier, the students had developed a propensity for dealing with the discomfort of being a 'fish out of water' – a number since they were in primary school:

I had nothing else to do but work in lessons, and I was pretty badly bullied. And I remember telling my teacher once, and she was like 'Well be like everyone else, and do that kind of thing', and I didn't. I mean, I've always been ... I'm not a cool person. My mum was still putting me in knitted jumpers. (Linsey)

Resilience and coping with adversity are all qualities that are far more associated with working rather than middle classness but in working-class contexts are taken for granted and often read as stoicism, 'making the best of a bad situation'. However, such qualities of resilience and coping with adversity become productive resources for the working-class students in the middle-class contexts they have moved into, – they help in dealing with the strange and unfamiliar. The students also have other assets that are much more common in the Southern context. Like many of the Southern middle-class students they are extremely determined, passionate about their subject area, and single minded. But a major difference between them and the majority of their Southern middle-class counterparts, who have attended private or selective state schools and have parents who themselves attended university, is that they have had to struggle against the odds to even get to Southern. And they have done this from backgrounds largely lacking in external support and resources. As a consequence, they have developed an impressive array of internal resources, and display a self-reliant independence. As Jim asserts:

If I'm struggling with something, or needed some advice on anything I doubt I would go to anyone here. But that's partly because of my personality, um, I was brought up in a context of individuals, I'd always been taught that the only person who can help you is yourself.

While Jamie reported:

My time at school was entirely down to me and if I didn't do anything it didn't get done. It wasn't going to happen. No one expected that much of me. But here there are loads of people who have had a much more structured education. It's not forced on them but you know they're expected to do this or that in certain ways and that just wasn't the case for me.

Like the students in Aries and Seider's US study (2007), most of the students focused on personal characteristics such as determination, self-reliance, motivation and hard work as important to academic success, accepting the meritocratic myth. But implicit in both Jim and Jamie's words are the ways in which class generates very different school learning experiences even for those students across social class who are academically successful. In many middle-class families, as well as the support that comes through middle-class schooling, there is lots of explicit support for learning ranging from parents helping with homework to paying for private tuition (Ball, 2003). And of course, for almost half the Southern students there are the highly structured and directive experiences that come through private schooling. In contrast, the working-class students rarely reported focused academic support from teachers, and most of the support from family is implicit (Reay et al., 2001). While there is much encouragement and good will there is little evidence of active teaching and guidance from parents. One consequence is that the working-class students display strong self-regulation in learning (Vermunt, 1998), often reported in interviews as being present from an early age.

University Choice Processes

There was little of the active planning in relation to university choice seen in many middle-class families (Reay et al., 2005). In terms of a spectrum ranging from determined ambition to 'clueless serendipity' the Southern students were mostly positioned on the side of serendipity. While they knew by the time they entered sixth form that they wanted to go to university, there was no long-term perception of Southern as a possible HE choice, apart from Jude who decided as a primary school pupil he would like to try for Southern if he possibly could. Rather, nearly all the working-class Southern students came to see themselves as potential 'Southern material' very late in their secondary school career. When the impetus to apply to Southern came it was rarely from the family; rather it was either the suggestion or the advocacy of one particular secondary school teacher combined, in the case of three of the nine students, with a positive experience of a Sutton Trust Summer School.⁴ So Jim attributes his place at Southern to his history teacher, while Louise talks about an FE lecturer who suggested she apply, and Chloe, the only mature student of the nine, describes the influence of her access course teacher:

So I just started sort of looking into universities but not really seriously. And then when I was doing my A-levels my chemistry tutor, he said to me, 'Hey you should think of going to Southern.' And I really knew nothing about Southern! (Louise)

It was my cultural studies teacher on the Access course who just sort of said in class 'Is anyone thinking of applying to Southern?' And everyone said 'No' and then as we were leaving she just called me back and said 'Why don't you give it some serious thought? Your grades are really good.' So I thought 'Well I may as well go for it.' (Chloe)

However, in contrast to the lack of consideration as to which university to attend, and in particular any consideration of Southern as a possible choice, a further surprising finding was how many of our students reported that they knew from an early age what they wanted to be in occupational terms even though no one in their immediate family or social circle were professionals:

Well I always, from about the time I was 13 or so I decided I wanted to be an engineer. And I knew to be an engineer that you needed a degree. But I'd not really thought of university before that. No one in my family had ever been. (Louise)

I thought of being a solicitor when I was about 9, but I really knew nothing about it ... I told mum that I wanted to go into soliciting when I was older, and she was rather shocked about that and nearly crashed the car, like you want to do what? But I think she understood what I meant. So yeah, I kind of thought about it at primary school. (Linsey)

Ever since Year 7, Year 8, I don't know why, I got it into my head that I was going to be a barrister. Now I'm not sure if I'm going to be a barrister, but I am enjoying law, and I definitely had it in my head since I was 12. (Jamie)

Yet, despite aspirations to professionalism, they evidently have not set out to acquire a broad array of dominant cultural capital. In some ways their response to the educational system is strongly reminiscent of Bourdieu's working-class survivors. Their strive for distinction is the opposite of distinction because it involves both recognition of lack and the avowal of self-seeking aspiration (Bourdieu, 1990b: 10–11). They have had to focus so intently on achieving academic success in their chosen field that they have foregone wider cultural accomplishments and they are open about their efforts. What they do is work and work extremely hard. As Linsey reports, she did nothing else but work hard at school. For Linsey, going to university is not what 'people like us do'. Rather she is elaborating a working-class habitus where educational success comes, if it comes at all, through visible industry and intensive single-minded application (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). But when it is pointed out to Linsey that she clearly must have had some encouragement because she ended up with a place at Southern, she replied:

Well it wasn't the comprehensive I went to, it's not fantastic. Me and two others have gone to University. That's out of about, more than 30. Most of my form dropped out, or dropped out at various stages in A-levels. A lot of them started but were gone within a couple of weeks.

For Linsey and most of the Southern working-class students, the institutional habitus of the school played a relatively minor role in encouraging a sense of entitlement in relation to elite higher education (Sutton Trust, 2008); rather, as we have seen, it was often the support and effort of one individual teacher. Instead, students talk in terms of vague dreams and wistful hopes. None of the working-class students had considered going to Southern as anything more than a dream, despite university in a more general sense having been a clearly articulated project often from primary school. Bourdieu makes a distinction between the relationship to the future that might be called a project, and which poses the future as future, that is, as a possibility constituted as such ... as opposed to the relationship to the future that he calls protension or preperceptive anticipation, a relationship ... to a future that is almost present (1998: 80–2). For many of the white middle-class students, going to Southern was simply what ‘people like us do’; a future that has been ‘almost present’ since childhood. In contrast, the working-class students experienced what could be called an epiphany, often a chance event late on in their secondary schooling when they suddenly came to the realization that Southern was a possibility.

The Shock of the Elite

On arrival at Southern the working-class students had what appeared to be an ‘out-of-habitus’ experience. But maybe it makes better sense to talk in terms of an ‘out of field’ experience. While many of the middle-class students were relatively familiar with the field of higher education, the working-class students are dealing with a very unfamiliar field. Although Bourdieu (1977: 94) argues that, for much of the time, the principles embodied in habitus ‘are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and hence cannot be touched by voluntary deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit’, he also recognizes that there are occasions when habitus can change and adapt (2005). And while an understanding of habitus as ‘beyond the grasp of consciousness’ worked well in terms of the middle-class students, it made little sense for these working-class students struggling in unfamiliar fields. Working-class students like Linsey, Jude, Jim and Jamie are characterized by conscious deliberation and awareness. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, they are engaged in acts of invention or more accurately reinvention – making dreams come true rather than doing what everyone like us does. For the working-class students attending Southern, the disjunction between field and habitus means that nothing can be taken for granted. The conjunction of working-class habitus and the middle-class field of the elite university generated adaptation and critical assessment and added impetus to the refashioning they had already had to engage in to become academically successful students (Cohen, 1998). For these working-class students in the middle-class field of higher education, habitus continues to be ‘restructured, transformed in its makeup by the pressure of the objective structures’ (Bourdieu, 2005: 47):

You feel like you're in a bubble here, it's not reality. I love going home, just because it's like normal people, and normal life, you know. You walk down the street, and you hear people talking about normal things, rather than like, you know, nuclear physics or something. It's completely weird. I've come to appreciate Southern now a bit more, but still not, you know, I don't know, I wouldn't recommend it to anyone else, particularly. (Amy)

There is no unproblematic alignment between the dispositions of the habitus and the demands of the field that Bourdieu argues is the most common experience. Rather, we can see clearly here 'the shock of the elite'. Four of the nine students talked of Southern as 'a bubble' and referred to its rarefied atmosphere. Other studies of working-class students at elite universities talk in terms of students 'compartmentalising different parts of the self, keeping them separate but allowing them to co-exist' (Aries and Seider, 2005: 435). There are elements of such compartmentalizing in what the working-class students said. As we have seen, Linsey often keeps quiet at home about her Southern experiences. But at the same time the transcripts, including Linsey's, are full of descriptions of visits from family and home friends. There are accounts not just of parents visiting their colleges and staying overnight but also of siblings, grandparents, even aunts and uncles. The students may be engaged in a constant fashioning and refashioning of the self (Bourdieu, 1990b), but their habituses still appear to retain key valued aspects of working-class self. While their habituses were clearly being continually modified by their encounter with the field of elite higher education, there was not 'the wholesale escaping of the habitus' that Friedmann (2005) writes about in relation to upward social mobility. Far from disappearing into a new world (Friedmann, 2005: 318), these students seemed determined to hold on to former aspects of self even as they gained new ones. We discuss this later in relation to all the working-class students' sense that Southern represented 'an elite middle-class bubble' rather than what they termed the 'real' or 'ordinary' world.

Our initial expectation was that the 'shock of the elite' would be predominantly social rather than academic, that the students' main preoccupations, as other studies have found (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004), would be around the difficulties of fitting in socially. All the students expressed some degree of concern around social fit, ranging from Amy's visceral distaste for those she termed the 'posh' students to more tempered worries about social differences:

I wasn't keen on Southern as a place and all my preconceptions were 'Oh, it's full of posh boarding school types.' And it was all true, you know 'Daddy pays for everything types' and I really hated my first year here ... it was like everyone was really weird ... it was a bit of a culture shock. (Amy)

But the students' main concerns were focused on the academic. Despite a strong sense that at last they would be recognized and valued for their academic

dispositions, students all expressed anxieties about what they saw as ‘an enormous leap’ from A-level to undergraduate study. So Jamie laments the fact that students at other universities can actually make use of their A-level notes while the academic level is such at Southern that they become redundant. Even experience of earlier academic success and a positive learner identity does not compensate for the self-doubt that inevitably emerges when confronted with a totally unfamiliar educational field, seemingly populated by ‘the clever, more self confident middle classes’ (Aries and Seider, 2005: 428). Baxter and Britton (2001: 99) describe ‘the painful dislocation’ between old and newly evolving habitus for working-class students going on to higher education. Such ‘painful dislocation’ was evident in how the working-class students described their first few terms, but whereas for Baxter and Britton’s students the focus was on the social aspects of the experience the Southern students were as much if not more preoccupied with the academic:

It’s really hard because you don’t know how clever you are in relation to everyone else. Because at school, you’re in your class and you know who puts their hand up a lot with the right answers, you know what marks you get on the tests and stuff. Here you haven’t got a clue. So you assume everyone is cleverer than you. And the only time you get to realize this is when you have a supervision, and you can judge yourself compared to your supervision partner, because you kind of get a feel for them. So you, you feel like the stupid one automatically, because you assume everyone else is cleverer than you. Well, I do. Some people think they’re great. (Nicole)

And:

I was terribly home sick at first and thought I was mad to try and come here. You know that everyone else is brilliant and just look at stupid little me. But I never really seriously considered giving up and going home. (Linsey)

So although the students at Southern had already developed qualities of self-reliance, self-regulation and resilience through the process of becoming successful academic learners at school, they still experienced struggle, challenge and difficulty, particularly in the first year. Granfield (1991: 336) found that the class background of working-class students in an elite American university positioned them as cultural outsiders and led to crises in competency and fears of academic inadequacy. Nearly all the working-class Southern students in the study had a crisis of confidence on arriving at university. For some their anxieties were alleviated by the end of the first term, for others they lasted for most of their first year. As both Jamie and Linsey make clear in the quotes below, there is a necessary adjustment to be made between being academic stars at school and just one of many academically able students at Southern:

If you were the best at your secondary school ... you’re certainly not going to be the best here. There will be a lot, probably a lot of people, who are putting in the same amount of effort and doing just as well if not better so you just have to get on with it and do the best that you can. (Jamie)

It was really hard especially in the first term. Until I did well in the first year, I just didn't know whether I was clever enough to be here. I didn't feel like I was supposed to be here, and it was difficult. I felt because I came from a comprehensive I couldn't be as clever as them and that they'd look down on me. I think it took me the first year to appreciate that people weren't really bothered. In some ways they think you must be cleverer if you've come in from a comprehensive but I just thought they'd think I was stupid and it took a year to get over it and feel I was their equal. (Linsey)

But for Amy a combination of feeling out of place socially and not enjoying the course led to serious consideration of leaving:

My trouble was I didn't like it here but my boyfriend hated it even more. So in an attempt to convince him to stay, I kind of forced myself to stay. But I think if I'd have been totally on my own, I would have really seriously considered just leaving and going somewhere else. But then, you can't sort of be a dropout, it's like social stigma. And my parents would be so upset, so it's not an easy decision to make, to leave. It's got better and I actually enjoy what I do now, my course is just so much better.

Amy was the only student to seriously consider withdrawing. And by the end of the fieldwork all nine students had either successfully graduated or made it into the third year; a much higher success rate than for working-class students more generally across the university sector (Christie et al., 2004). Yet evident in all three quotes are the stresses and anxieties inherent in the process of adjusting to unfamiliar fields. Despite their academic success, the working-class students at Southern are groping towards rather than grasping 'a feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 9). This they appear to acquire not through 'doxic submission' (Bourdieu, 1997: 177) but through a critical evaluation that positions them more powerfully within the field. Repositioning is accomplished in two ways: by working extremely hard, but also, as we see below, by re-evaluating the field. They all, in different ways, engage in a reappraisal that questions and problematizes the eminence and centrality of Southern.

Studying in an Elite White Middle-class 'Bubble'

After the students recovered from 'the shock of the elite' and moved into their second and third years it became evident that for all nine students Southern represents neither normativity nor balance. Like the working-class students in Bufton's (2003) study, they make a distinction between 'the real world' and the academic world. Even Linsey, who talks of Southern as a liberating experience, also describes it as:

Full of people who are obsessive over little things which is quite fun and reassuring because it makes my obsessiveness seem normal, although there is one thing that I don't like about it. While everyone is a bit odd, but not in a really odd way, there

are some people who are like really controlling, they structure their day and they know exactly what they are doing every minute of the day, and every second counts. Some people are obsessed with venus fly traps or a mathematical equation or there are just lots of people who are a bit weird, they have their eccentricities. But the good thing is that everyone knows they've got a little something that's odd about them, that's a bit different, but everyone tolerates each other's differences because they all know that everyone is a bit odd. (Linsey)

This sense of over-performativity, arcane practices and slightly autistic behaviour is also evident in what Nicole says:

Like this notion of time is so intense, we refer to it as the Southern bubble because the nicest experience you can get when you're at Southern is leaving it ... As soon as I realize I'm out of the city it's like a huge weight just goes and I'm like there's a real world out there. People will wake up the next morning if their essay isn't finished. People will still have a heart beating if they haven't finished their reading. The world isn't ending if you haven't finished your work. That's what the Southern bubble is, it's a time warp, it's so weird, so regimented by deadlines. (Nicole)

There is no talk here about academic brilliance and being 'the brightest of the bright' but rather an ironic recognition of the compulsive obsessive workaholic dispositions that constitute the highly successful academic habitus. For the most part, these students have a critically reflexive, questioning stance on Southern and what it represents. This is in contrast to our research on the white middle classes in unfamiliar educational fields (Reay, forthcoming; Reay et al., 2007), where facing an unfamiliar field was more likely to generate a protective reinforcement of originary habitus rather than any change or transformation. Critiques range from Nicole and Amy's observations that Southern is far too rarefied and segregated from the real world to Jamie's passionate assertion that 'Southern needs to pull in lots more non-traditional students but also to actively discourage private and selective state school students.' With such views it is perhaps unsurprising that four of the nine students were actively engaged in outreach work with non-selective state schools, trying to encourage other non-traditional students to apply. A number were also considering occupations that included a communitarian aspect. Jamie wanted to work as a trade union lawyer, Linsey was undertaking a masters with a view to going on to doctoral studies in the area of Human Rights, while Owen wanted to train as a teacher through the Teacher First scheme.

Yet, while they expressed a critical reflexivity and an extensive critique of Southern as a space that was limited socially, there was surprisingly little sign of Skeggs' (2004: 89) 'habitus of recalcitrance'. In place of anger and resistance to the status quo was a strong investment in the academic field. The working-class students' energies seemed to be directed towards conforming to middle-class educational norms in order to succeed academically, even as they developed a critical stance on Southern as a social space. In Southern there were

the comforts of academic acceptance and compliance in contrast to their secondary schools where a majority of the working-class students had been mocked for working hard. Linsey, who of all the students had experienced the most bullying at school, declared 'Southern has liberated me'. We also gain a strong sense of both liberation and empowerment in Chloe's words:

Now I'm finishing it's just like the only limitation is yourself. That's how I feel. I can go and live anywhere. I can go and do anything because I've done this. And that's maybe a bit melodramatic but this is a real sense of achievement.

Conclusion

The data reveal the powerful influences of prior learning experiences and dispositions but also the dynamic between these and students' current academic contexts. Both conspire to position the Southern students as 'good learners', those who most approximate to 'the ideal learner'. These nine working-class students have developed almost superhuman levels of motivation, resilience and determination, sometimes at the cost of peer group approval. They have managed to achieve considerable success as learners and acquire the self-confidence and self-regulation that accompanies academic success against the odds. Two out of the four third-year students gained first class degrees (both female students), the other two got 2:1s. And the teaching methods, academic support systems and resources at Southern all reinforce and nurture this developing sense of 'mastery' in relation to knowledge.

A majority of these working-class students had faced the paradoxical situation of being more like a 'fish out of water' in their largely working-class state secondary schools where their highly developed academic dispositions fitted uneasily into the field of predominantly working-class schooling. The irony is that they have a greater sense of fitting in as learners in elite HE than they had at school surrounded by 'people like them'. They may be 'strangers in paradise' but they are 'familiar strangers' (Puwar, 2004), fitting in as learners despite their class difference. As Puwar (2004: 128) argues 'they, at least, partially mirror and clone the self-image of the hegemonic norm'. It is important, therefore, to separate out learner from social identities, and to understand the varying extent to which individuals are able to move in and out of different identity positionings. These students have managed tensions between habitus and field since early childhood, generating dispositions in which 'reflexivity ceases to reflect a temporary lack of fit between habitus and field but itself becomes habitual' (Sweetman, 2003: 541). Adams (2006: 524) elaborates how 'reflexive capabilities' rarely work as an impetus for hope and mobility for the vast majority of the working classes. Rather, social and self-awareness often result in fatalism and stasis. However, these students are Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) working-class exceptions that prove the rule. Their combination of highly developed academic dispositions and reflexive habituses generate opportunities and academic success.

For Bourdieu (1999b: 340):

... pedagogical action can ... because of and despite the symbolic violence it entails, open the possibility of an emancipation founded on awareness and knowledge of the conditionings undergone and on the imposition of new conditionings designed durably to counter their effects.

We see in the students' reflexivity about their schooling experiences, their critiques of Southern as a social space, the openness about their industry and hard work, and most directly in Chloe and Linsey's declarations of liberation 'such possibilities of emancipation'. Sweetman argues that, for some, reflexivity and flexibility may actually characterize the habitus, and that, for those who display a flexible or reflexive habitus, processes of refashioning – whether emancipatory or otherwise – may be second nature rather than difficult to achieve (2003: 537). This appeared to be the case for these nine students.

At the same time, their accounts are an interesting counterbalance to conventional academic hierarchies that position universities like Southern as 'the best'. While on one level they recognize and are grateful for the 'value-added' they are gaining academically, and are fiercely loyal about Southern, the students all have a reflexive critique of the costs and losses, as well as the gains, in attending universities like Southern. And these critiques all hinge one way or another on homogeneity; for all the students there is too much sameness and not enough difference at universities like Southern.

At the time this research was being conducted, a national broadsheet newspaper published an article on the front page entitled 'Education apartheid as private schools flood elite universities' (Paton, 2007). Academically successful working-class students gain enormously from studying at institutions like Southern, flourishing as learners and growing in confidence both academically and socially, whilst retaining, in the case of the nine students in this study, a commitment and sense of loyalty to family and home background. The gains to the university are far less likely to be considered. In a period when the chances of students like Jude, Linsey, Amy and Jamie attending Southern are falling, we would argue that the ability of universities like Southern to renew and revitalize themselves, to become fully 'paid-up' members of the global, multi-cultural 21st century, is crucially dependent on attracting the very students who are increasingly being excluded. As Archer and Leathwood (2003: 176) argue, the assumption is always that it is 'the working-class individual who must adapt and change, in order to fit into, and participate in, the (unchanged) higher education institutional culture'. A second irony then is the failure of the widening access and participation debate to recognize that elite universities need non-traditional students just as much as the students need them. Both need the other in order to flourish, the students academically and the universities socially. Within the current status quo, an enormous number of working-class students are excluded from realizing their academic potential. Yet, equally worrying and even less recognized is the failure of the elite universities to realize their potential for combining academic excellence with a rich social diversity.

Notes

- 1 An elite English university, named 'Southern' for this study.
- 2 The wider research project (ESRC RES-139-25-0208) investigates the experiences of working-class undergraduates from a variety of ethnic groups and age groups, studying a range of subject areas in four different HEIs. Initially we conducted a questionnaire survey at these institutions (1209 completed questionnaires were analysed) before conducting individual and group interviews with a range of students from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (89 students in total). We then focused on 27 working-class students who were interviewed three times over a 15-month period.
- 3 This article focuses on nine students out of the 27 who went to Southern, an elite university.
- 4 The Sutton Trust was established in 1997 with the aim of challenging educational inequality, both through research and by providing educational opportunities for those from non-privileged backgrounds. These include university-based Summer Schools for non-traditional HE applicants.

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Diane Reay

Is a Professor of Education in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge with particular interests in social justice issues in education, Pierre Bourdieu's social theory, and cultural analyses of social class. Recent research projects include ESRC studies of

children's experiences of transition from primary to secondary school and white middle class families and urban socially diverse comprehensive schooling. Her books include *Degrees of Choice: social class, race and gender in higher education* 2005 (with Stephen Ball and Miriam David) and *Activating Participation: parents and teachers working towards partnership* (2005) co-edited with Gil Crozier

Address: Faculty of Education University of Cambridge 184, Hills Road Cambridge CB2 2PQ

E-mail: dr311@cam.ac.uk

Gill Crozier

Is Professor of Education and Assistant Dean Research in the School of Education Roehampton University. She is a Sociologist of Education and her work has focused on 'race' and its intersection with social class and gender. She has researched extensively issues relating to parents and schools, and young people, and is also concerned with education policy, and the socio-cultural influences upon identity formation and learner experiences. Recent research projects include: the ESRC/TLRP project: *The Socio-Cultural and Learning Experiences of Working Class Students in Higher Education (RES-139-25-0208)*; the ESRC *Identities, Educational Choices and the White Urban Middle Classes (RES-148-25-0023)* project. The ESRC project *Parents, Students and the School Experience: Asian Families' Perspectives (R000239671)*. Her books include: *Parents and Schools: Partners or Protagonists?* (2000) Stoke-on-Trent and USA,VA: Stylus Publishing; Trentham Books and *Activating Participation: mothers, fathers and teachers working towards partnership*. Edited collection with Diane Reay. (2004) Stoke-on-Trent and USA,VA: Stylus Publishing; Trentham Books.

Address: Roehampton University, School of Education, Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PJ

E-mail: g.crozier@roehampton.ac.uk

John Clayton

Is a Lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy in the Department of Social Sciences and Faculty of Education and Society at the University of Sunderland. He is a sociologist and human geographer and his work is around the themes of identity, belonging and social relations, with a particular focus on 'race' and social class, as well as connections between the social and the spatial. More specifically, his work has concentrated upon the everyday geographies of inter-ethnic relations in the city of Leicester, England; social

class and the Higher Education experience in the UK (ESRC/TLRP ref: RES-139-25-0208) and the connections between digital and social exclusion through an evaluation of digital inclusion activity in the city of Sunderland, England. Recent work includes papers published in *International Studies in Sociology of Education* (forthcoming) *Social and Cultural Geography* (2008) and a chapter in Dwyer, C. and Bressey, C. (2008) *New Geographies of Race and Racism*.

Address: University of Sunderland, Dept. of Social Sciences, Priestman Building, Green Terrace, Sunderland, SRI 3PZ

E-mail: John.clayton@sunderland.ac.uk