

## University of Southampton Research Repository ePrints Soton

Copyright © and Moral Rights for this thesis are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder/s. The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given e.g.

AUTHOR (year of submission) "Full thesis title", University of Southampton, name of the University School or Department, PhD Thesis, pagination

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**  
**FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**School of Social Sciences**

**Defining the middle classes:**

**Using Bourdieu's trilogy of habitus, capital and  
field to deconstruct the reproduction of middle-  
class privilege**

**by**

**Gayna Davey**

**Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**December 2009**

## **Abstract**

This is a thesis about the middle classes. Using Bourdieu's trilogy of habitus, capital and field, the thesis attempts to capture the logic of practice embedded in middle-class decision-making. Drawing on longitudinal, qualitative research across two sixth-form institutions, I explore how young people's and parents' narratives disrupt dominant accounts of the middle class as homogenously privileged and strategic players in the field of education. The thesis therefore proposes a more nuanced representation of middle class practice. Furthermore, with a fee-paying sixth-form the primary research site, the thesis addresses a neglected and often demonised 'other'.

The research explores the problems and gaps in the way that Bourdieu has been used so far to understand educational decision-making as a classed practice. I argue there has been a tendency to focus on the successful and straightforward educational outcomes of middle-class young people. The literature says very little about their practices, and there is a tendency to represent them as symbols of their parents' success. In many ways, middle-class young people are offered as a privileged, homogenous 'other' to working-class disadvantage. When the lens is directed to their parents, the literature emphasises how capital accumulations are strategically deployed to secure advantage for their children. The particular and practical logic generated by habitus is replaced by deliberate strategy. Although using a Bourdieuan vocabulary, when representing the middle classes, the workings of the habitus are largely absent.

## Table of contents

Abstract.....	ii
Appendices .....	viii
List of tables .....	ix
Summary of participants and parental occupations.....	ix
Declaration of authorship .....	x
Acknowledgements .....	xi
Introduction .....	1
The neglect of the role of institution in classed practices research .....	5
A more complex model of student choice .....	7
Classed practices as constituting exploitation? .....	8
Chapter 1: Redefining class.....	11
Introduction .....	11
‘Class’ as a victim of social change .....	15
The postmodern shift from the collective to the individual .....	17
Talking past each other.....	19
Defending class.....	20
Pierre Bourdieu and social class – a symbolic and relational construction .....	25
Habitus .....	29
Habitus – continuity and change? .....	32
Field .....	33
Feminist approaches.....	35
Being ordinary .....	37
Classed practices – a fundamental break? .....	39
Setting a new agenda .....	41
Chapter 2: Educational decision-making as a classed practice.....	43
Introduction .....	43
Educational practices within a context of higher education expansion and differentiation.....	45

A uniform representation of the middle-class .....	50
Strategic parenting as mediated through habitus? .....	59
Student decision-making .....	63
Educational classed practices research: 'from the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies' (Bourdieu 1977: 3) .....	69
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	72
Introduction .....	72
Qualitative research .....	73
Narrative interviews .....	74
Using Bourdieuan tools to deconstruct the field .....	80
Research plan .....	88
Grayshott Grammar .....	88
Winterbourne College .....	89
Gaining access .....	90
Winterbourne College .....	91
The sample .....	92
Summary of participants .....	93
Carrying out a longitudinal study .....	95
Timetable .....	96
Ethical considerations .....	97
Chapter 4: Mapping the field .....	100
Introduction .....	100
An unstable field .....	101
Government rhetoric .....	104
The particular case of Oxbridge .....	108
Popular representations of 'going to university' .....	109
Positioning the two sixth-forms .....	112
Geographical spread .....	113
Studying locally and in the region .....	114
Studying nationally and internationally .....	116
Status of higher education institution .....	117
Subjects .....	118

Entry requirements .....	120
UCAS scores .....	124
Conclusions .....	126
Chapter 5: Moving closer to the field .....	129
Introduction .....	129
Creating symbolic capital .....	130
'A-levels as currency in the great sweetie shop that is UCAS'	
(Headmaster in a speech to parents) .....	132
'At least 90% of our students secure their first choice of university'	
(prospectus) .....	134
For those 'going to a normal person' university .....	138
'Sixth-form and beyond' .....	139
UCAS Evening .....	141
Consuming symbolic capital .....	143
Gift exchange .....	146
Conclusions .....	151
Chapter 6: Entering the field – becoming privileged? Students'	
narratives of transition to Grayshott Grammar .....	154
Introduction .....	154
The students .....	156
Using habitus to think outside of the class box(es) .....	157
Putting Bourdieu into practice .....	162
Leaving me behind? .....	163
Becoming la-di-dah? .....	170
Hopes and expectations of a private education .....	175
A typical private school student? .....	178
Conclusions .....	183
Chapter 7: Middle-class students' decision-making – a three-way model	
.....	186
Introduction .....	186
The participants .....	188
Beyond a binary model .....	189

Natural, effortless, destined .....	191
Strategic and ambitious .....	191
Aspiring and vocationally-specific .....	192
Using Bourdieu's tools of capital and habitus as underpinning the model .....	192
'Hot' knowledge .....	195
'Strategic and ambitious' decision-making .....	204
Aspiring and vocationally-specific .....	212
Conclusions .....	220
Chapter 8: 'They'd rather lose their right arm than send their children to State school'. (Barbara, mother of Ruth).....	223
Introduction .....	223
The participants .....	225
Articulating choice – glimpsing habitus.....	227
'Those buildings...' .....	242
Claiming (the right) middle-class identity?.....	244
The university project.....	245
Conclusions .....	250
Chapter 9: Conclusions.....	253
Introduction .....	253
Working within Bourdieu's framework of habitus, capital and field .	255
An interrelated framework.....	258
The logic of practice .....	259
Using the trilogy of habitus, capital and field to pierce through the vaguely-defined concepts of confidence and privilege which characterise the representation of middle-class practice .....	260
Individual practice as mediated by the institution and its position in the field. Middle-class students and the fee-paying sector: an easy correspondence? .....	262
Using Bourdieu's concept of 'doxa' to correct the neglect of the organisation, and its place in the field.....	264

Defining middle-class parents' practices through the language of exploitation and conflict .....	266
New questions?.....	271
References .....	273
Reports.....	282
Web sources.....	283
Government White Papers .....	283
Appendices .....	285
Summary of student participants .....	288
Summary of student destinations .....	289
Letters to potential participants.....	290
Questionnaire .....	294
Consent form.....	297
Schedule of questions .....	298



## **Appendices**

Timetable of interviews and fieldwork

Letters to prospective participants

Student participants - university destinations

Schedule of questions

Consent form

## **List of tables**

Summary of participants and parental occupations

Distance travelled to university (by sixth-form)

University choice (by type of HEI)

UCAS score distribution (by sixth-form)

## Declaration of authorship

I.....GAYNA DAVEY.....

[please print name]

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis] ...DEFINING THE MIDDLE CLASSES: USING BOURDIEU'S

TRILOGY OF HABITUS, CAPITAL AND FIELD TO DECONSTRUCT THE

REPRODUCTION OF MIDDLE-CLASS

PRIVILEGE.....

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed: .....

.....

Date: .....28 APRIL 2010

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisors, Sue Heath and Susan Halford for their support, guidance and encouragement throughout the process. I would also like to thank Pauline Leonard for her contribution as an advisor to the supervisory team.

For his encouragement of my interest in Bourdieu's work, and his willingness to listen as my knowledge of Bourdieu developed, I would like to thank Mike Grenfell.

I would especially like to acknowledge the support of the sociologist, the late Jon Clark, who encouraged my return to study.

I would also like to thank all those in the School of Social Sciences and the School of Education.

Of course, without the support of the staff and pupils who participated in the research, this thesis would not be written. I thank them for their time and enthusiasm.

Above all, I want to thank my family for their patience and support.



## **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).

The middle classes provide the focus for this thesis. Whereas the working class once dominated the study of class analysis, the research lens is now directed towards the middle-classes, and as Mike Savage observes:

If there is still a role for class analysis it is to continue to emphasise the brute realities of social inequality and the extent to which these are constantly effaced by a middle class, individualised culture that fails to register the social implications of its routine actions (2000).

Social class inequalities endure, whilst at the same time being disguised through the very ordinary behaviours which generate them. The middle classes subtly and quietly reproduce privilege through their very ordinary choices, tastes and behaviours. It is the exploration of these 'classed practices' which has defined class analysis in the past decade. The work of Pierre Bourdieu has driven the development of the classed practices agenda, and for Bourdieu, the reproduction of middle class privilege is achieved through investment in education (Bourdieu and Boltanski 2000). Thus, for Bourdieu, the middle class relationship with education is pivotal to the classed structuring of inequality.

It is the aim of this thesis, through the particular example of educational decision making, to explore the problems and gaps in the way that Bourdieu has been used so far to understand classed practices.

Educational decisions provide an important site in which to see how 'class' happens in everyday life, and the ability of individuals to distinguish themselves from the mass takes on ever greater meaning. Set against government rhetoric of university provision as offering universal benefits, it is 'more important than ever to get the 'right' university degree' (Power and Whitty 2008). The promise once offered by higher education is no longer assured, and the transition from sixth-form to university represents a particular moment in the generation of classed inequalities. How the middle classes continue to secure educational advantage within the context of increasing numbers of young people going to university helps us understand the way in which class is made.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in the reproduction of middle class advantage, and it is now important to go beyond straightforward questions of participation or non-participation. The nature of university participation remains differentiated by social class, and the middle classes continue to dominate the most prestigious institutions (The Sutton Trust 2008; data supplied by UCAS (2008)). Education decision making is a classed practice, and the vast body of research produced by Stephen Ball and Diane Reay has shaped and dominated the sub-field of educational classed practices. (Ball 2003; Ball, Bowe and Gerwitz 1995; 1996; Ball, Davies, Reay and David 2002; Reay 1998b; 2000; Reay and Ball 1997; Reay, David and Ball 2005). Whilst impressive and influential in its contribution to the classed practices research agenda, there are some fundamental difficulties in its appropriation of Bourdieu. It is the contention of this thesis that within educational classed practices research, there has been a tendency to use Bourdieu in a limited and partial way.

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. However it is one of the arguments of this thesis that the educational classed practices literature, whilst professing to focus on practice, gives excessive emphasis to classed outcomes. There is a failure to capture the nature of middle class practice, and which is an inherent dimension of Bourdieu's sociology. It is therefore my aim to reorient attention to the practical logic which generates middle class practice.

With the aim of contributing to the broader classed practices agenda, the thesis engages with one of the key concerns raised by Bottero (2004; 2005). Her critique raises important questions as far as the relationship between 'renewed' and 'traditional' class analysis is concerned. Whether classed practices can be defined through the language of 'class', and in particular, with the assertion that practices constitute 'exploitation', invites us to address issues which go to the heart of the renewal project.

Let me now provide a brief overview of how the thesis will be structured.

Chapter one reviews the literature on class analysis, with a particular focus on how Bourdieu has driven its renewal.

Chapter two considers the way in which educational practices have provided a vehicle for the development of the classed practices research discipline.

Chapter three discusses the research design and methodological approach adopted in this thesis. The two sixth-forms are introduced: a fee-paying institution I have called 'Grayshott Grammar', and a state sixth-form I have called 'Winterbourne College'. The practical and



philosophical questions engaged with in this chapter reflect a desire to focus on practices as negotiated and incomplete. Thus the qualitative design and research methods are discussed as ongoing activities. Furthermore, the chapter argues for a reconciliation of a Bourdieuan conceptual framework with its methodological basis. Above all, I argue for the need to work with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field relationally. Whilst each of the subsequent chapters gives *emphasis* to the role of particular concepts, this chapter maintains that their effective use must be within an integrated framework. My aim therefore is to avoid what I describe as the all too common 'pick and mix' approach whereby individual concepts are introduced into research without sufficient reference to their relationship with the whole.

Chapter four has its focus on field and sets out the context in which students and parents make their educational decisions. Against the rhetoric of widening participation as providing uniform benefits and as a vehicle of social mobility, the chapter maps out a stubbornly structured field whose boundaries reflect long histories. With the emphasis on field, the chapter goes beyond merely offering a context or background. Its aim is to show how the educational practices discussed in subsequent chapters cannot be treated as if in a vacuum.

With the previous chapters having set the scene and provided the wider context for my research, the rest of the thesis explores the following themes: the neglect of the role of the institution in classed practices research (chapters five and six); a more complex model of student decision-making (chapter seven); classed practices as constituting exploitation (chapter eight). Each of these themes is now briefly introduced.

## **The neglect of the role of institution in classed practices research**

With the emphasis on the family as a site for accumulation and mobilisation of capital, the classed practices literature gives very little consideration to the role of the educational institution. Even less attention is given to the private school sector, which is commonly represented as a single-dimensional 'other' to the variety of state school provision. Moreover, the advantages of being middle-class are seen as compounded by attending a private institution. So, other than being labelled as privileged, we are left with very little understanding of the middle-class young people who attend private schools. This is an important gap in our knowledge since we know that private schools continue to dominate access to Oxbridge and the 'Russell Group' more widely (Sutton Trust 2007).

With the private sector neglected from research, its status is perhaps that of 'the elephant in the room'. Nevertheless, the private sector needs to be brought more explicitly onto the research agenda. To consign its presence to a symbol of privilege is to fail to critically engage in the education system used by 9% of 16-18 year olds (HESA). Consequently with its primary site a fee-paying sixth-form, the thesis enters unfamiliar territory. My study focuses on 12 students as they study for A-levels. The students have in common their designation of 'middle class' through their parents' occupation. Three of the young people have joined the sixth-form from state secondary schools; six have transferred from Grayshott Grammar's year 11, and three have left Grayshott Grammar to attend a local state sixth form, ('Winterbourne College'). Whilst my focus is primarily on Grayshott Grammar, and I make no claims for this to be a comparative study, I am able to map each institution onto the field of higher education through data on university destinations. In having these institutional

profiles, together with information from both Careers Officers, I attempt to distinguish the role of institutional capital in students' university decision-making processes.

Nevertheless, my primary concern is to disrupt the assumed correspondence of the middle classes and a fee-paying institution. In chapter five, with the focus on Grayshott Grammar, my aim is to offer subtlety and real-life authenticity through an accumulation of richly-detailed material gathered from observations over a two-year period. With its emphasis on symbolic capital, the chapter argues that Grayshott Grammar is a producer of taste for university participation. Through a process of narrowing boundaries, and by establishing understandings of university choice, the institution constructs its position in close proximity to the elite universities.

The symbolic production of class is a key dimension of Bourdieu's analysis, and the chapter engages with his interpretation of 'gift-exchange' to explore the relationship between parents and the fee-paying institution. 'Gift-exchange', which can be understood as a metaphor for the underlying principle of Bourdieu's sociological project, offers a powerful and insightful way to deconstruct the nature of the transaction between parents and Grayshott Grammar. Moreover, in 'gift-exchange' Bourdieu draws our attention to the significance of the symbolism and codes of class. I argue that the relationship between parents and institution is mediated by an engagement and affinity with Grayshott Grammar's dominant, class-coded capital.

The powerful influence exerted by Grayshott Grammar's dominant capital is explored further in chapter six, when I follow the journeys of three newcomers to its sixth-form. The young people's narratives resonate with the findings of Proweller (1998), but contradict the more widespread assumptions, notably in Reay and Ball's research (2003;

2005), that private school students are doubly-privileged through class and school institution. Furthermore, with its emphasis on habitus, this chapter explores the subjective dimensions of class through the students' experiences and responses to their new institution. Their narratives not only challenge the usual depiction of the private school reinforcing existing advantages, but help deconstruct vague and stereotypical notions of privilege. This chapter provides a contradiction to the classed practices literature's emphasis on the faultless correspondence of middle-class young people and private school. The relationship is assumed as seamlessly and effortlessly compounding privilege. Consequently we know little about the way in which middle-class young people develop their confidence, or 'feel for the game' which is said to characterise their educational practices.

### **A more complex model of student choice**

Chapter seven has its focus on university decision-making, and its conceptual emphasis is on habitus and social capital. This chapter argues that the dominant binary model leaves room to probe more deeply into university decision-making practices. The binary model prompts a need for firstly, more nuanced exploration of students' classed practices, and secondly, to hear the voices of the middle-class students themselves. The ability of middle-class students to dominate access to particular universities cannot be reduced to vague notions of 'confidence' or 'self-assurance'. Therefore through developing a 'three-way' model of middle-class decision-making, I am challenging the uniform representation of the middle classes.

Moreover, through the three-way model, I am attempting to deconstruct the vague and sociologically crude notions of 'entitlement' which are used to define the middle classes. Whilst the notion of 'hot

knowledge' takes us some way to understanding how middle class students use higher quality information to make decisions, we know little about how that 'hot knowledge' is accessed. Furthermore, we are given very limited understanding as to how the 'hot knowledge' is negotiated by the young people. Reay concludes that 'primarily choosing to go to university is not really a choice at all for the middle-class' (2005). Without giving consideration to the process of decision-making we are unaware of how the middle-class students develop their affinities with prestigious universities, and what lies behind the paradox of natural distinction (Bourdieu 1990a: 108). The tendency otherwise is to accept and tacitly reinforce, legitimate and solidify the already strong relationship between middle-class students and the elite universities.

### **Classed practices as constituting exploitation?**

Whether parents' use of capital advantages can be described as exploitation must surely be tackled as part of the classed practices agenda. So, for Bottero, there is a fundamental difference between classed practices and class analysis as traditionally conceived. For her, classed practices reflect hierarchical inequality rather than exploitation. However, the notion of classed practices is one offered as an extension or reworking of class analysis, with new forms of exploitation carried out in new sites. Claims as to the existence of exploitation are not always explicit however. There is instead, some degree of caution, reluctance perhaps to go *that* far, for fear of dredging up that particular language with all its connotations. For example, Ball highlighting a tension between 'advantage' and 'adequacy' suggests that at some point practices may tip over from adequacy to advantage raises interesting questions about how exploitation is defined (2003). Thus, there is an implication that adequate support is somehow acceptable and legitimate, but beyond an unspecified point, parental support is

translated to advantage *at the expense* of someone else's child. Whether this constitutes exploitation is skirted around, but nevertheless implied through broadly defined notions of 'advantage'.

Thus, the question of exploitation raises fundamental issues about the extent to which parents' educational practices can be represented through class vocabulary. It points to the necessity to reconcile the position of 'classed practices' literature in relation to the 'class analysis' legacy. In chapter eight, my aim is to probe more deeply into the notions of 'advantage and adequacy' which take us closer to conceptualising exploitation. As I discuss in chapter two, the classed practices literature has characterised middle-class parents as embodying a negative and almost destructive version of middle-classness. Parents are portrayed as typifying middle-class self-interestedness and advantage-seeking; moreover, to use the private-sector is the final betrayal.

The narratives of three mothers who are now designated as 'middle-class' through occupation, but whose own backgrounds were described as 'working-class', articulate what it means to be, and to be perceived as middle-class beyond the labels and boxes assigned to individuals. These are the mothers of young people whose university decisions are characterised as 'strategic and ambitious' in the three way model of decision-making proposed in chapter seven. Thus, in its focus on the parents of these young people the chapter looks at the most active and involved of my middle-class participants.

Chapter nine draws together the conclusions from the thesis as a whole. It considers how the deconstruction of middle-class practices furthers our understanding of the 'particular-universal' class whose dominance is masked by their very normal and reasonable practices (Savage 2003). Furthermore, it considers how this more nuanced understanding of

middle-class educational practices contributes to the development of the broader classed practices programme.

# **Chapter 1: Redefining class**

## **Introduction**

This chapter stakes out the territory in which the thesis is set. Through the example of educational decision-making, the thesis has as its principal aim, to explore the problems and gaps in the way that Bourdieu has been used so far to understand classed practices. Whilst the research lens has been redirected to the middle classes, their representation through educational classed practices research is characterised by homogenously privileged and strategic intent. The thesis offers a more nuanced deconstruction of the middle classes, and moreover, captures the very particular logic of their practice. In doing so, the thesis grapples with the principles and vocabulary of classed practices research as it has developed alongside the class analysis tradition. As a programme which has revitalised the class agenda, the shift towards classed practices has generated exciting and innovative approaches to long-standing problems, and its assertive retort to the postmodern critique of class is impressive. However, there are aspects which continue to raise concern (Bottero 2004, 2005). In particular, whether the classed practices agenda has developed as a mature and distinctive field of research, or whether it remains captivated by the traditional class agenda, and with its full potential yet to be realised.

In the words of Pakulski and Waters, concepts of class are 'notoriously vague and tenuously stretched, with debates combining issues of semantics and substance' (1996:2). The aim of this chapter is to explore those debates; indeed, to tease out what lies behind the rhetoric. As Crompton observes, class analysts have had a tendency to 'talk past, rather than to, each other' (2008:9), and these 'pseudo-debates' (ibid), look for different answers to very different questions,



and from diverse epistemological starting points. Perhaps as Wacquant puts it, class analysis has been 'in pursuit of a fictitious goal' (in McNall and Levine: 1991:57). This chapter discusses class as it has been challenged and defended. It considers how the debates which started in the 1980s have contributed to the emergence of a new approach to class analysis, an account of classed practices, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu.

The first part of this chapter discusses the reasons for the widespread abandonment of class analysis. If class analysis was once at the heart of sociology, by the 1980s like flares and platform shoes, it became something of an embarrassment – in short, it went out of fashion. I argue that the displacement of class from the academic agenda stemmed from three distinct but related areas, and these were set within the context of social and economic change. The first was from shifts in the intellectual and ideological approaches associated with postmodernism. The second, in the frustration and disillusionment associated with the previous generation of sociologists' failure to show how individuals experience class. Thirdly, and arguably most importantly, as a critique of occupational-based class schemes which dominated at that time. I conclude the first section of this chapter by discussing how the methodologically-rigorous and narrow aims of the then dominant 'Nuffield paradigm' led, in Savage's words, to its becoming an 'increasingly arcane and technical specialism' (2000: 148). Divorced from concerns with identity or subjective experience, class analysis was unable to explain either wider social change or the cultural dimensions to inequality.

The second part of this chapter considers how contemporary approaches to class analysis have drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Although writing as early as the 1950s and known in Britain for his work in the sociology of education during the 1970s, Bourdieu's

concepts of habitus, capital and field have more recently been used as tools to offer a more dynamic understanding of class as it is lived and experienced through everyday life. Moreover, the revitalisation of class has been driven by a Bourdieuan interpretation which broadens the agenda from occupational and materialist approaches. For Bourdieu:

....constructed classes can be characterised in a certain way as sets of agents who, by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in social space (that is, in the distribution of powers), are subject to similar conditions of existence and conditioning factors and, as a result, are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices (1987: 6).

Thus, for Bourdieu, individuals occupy social space which is differentiated according to 'powers' or what are more usually described as 'capitals'. The volume and type of capital held by an individual serves to construct a position relative to others'. Moreover, relationships of distance or proximity become 'inscribed in the body', and thus generate habitus (ibid). Therefore Bourdieu opens up ways to understand the classed nature of behaviours, and as Crompton observes, his work is 'primarily concerned with the active processes of class structuring or class formation' (2008: 101).

The way in which Bourdieuan concepts have contributed to a 'rejuvenation' of class analysis is discussed in the final part of this chapter (Savage et al 2005). I discuss how British sociologists have developed and worked with Bourdieuan-inspired ideas to negotiate new understandings of class. Recent engagement with class is with a more broadly-defined concept and one which is centred on practice and experience rather than explicit class identification. Furthermore, considered as one of the key foci of class analysis, exploitation becomes more broadly defined in its articulation within classed practices research.

In particular, I consider how feminist interpretations of Bourdieu have drawn attention to the more personal and private forms of exploitation (Lawler 2005; Reay 1998; Skeggs 1997; 2004; 2005). These accounts bring together class and gender to provide powerful illustrations of classed subjectivities through the affective dimensions that habitus brings to the fore.

The chapter concludes with a consideration of whether in the academic engagement with class inspired by Bourdieu we are moving beyond what might reasonably be defined as 'class analysis'. I conclude that in the elasticity of terminology, and the distance from traditional conceptions, there are some important problems to address. The classed practices approach has provided a powerful counter to claims for the 'end of class', and its agenda opens up new terrain in which to explore how class happens. However, as I will discuss in relation to educational classed practices research, the potential offered by Bourdieu is not fully realised. The emphasis remains on classed outcomes rather than classed practices, and despite the new agenda's articulation of Bourdieuan vocabulary, it offers only a partial engagement with the principles underpinning Bourdieu's endeavour. Thus it is a contention of this thesis that new lines need to be drawn and terms of references made clear. These issues are elaborated in the chapter's conclusion, which signals the broad questions that will be taken up through the remainder of this thesis.

Let me now chart the developments that have led to the renewed interest in class, with first an overview of why it became regarded as an anachronism.

## **‘Class’ as a victim of social change**

The waning interest in class analysis was embedded in a broad social and political context of significant social and economic change. The 1970s heralded a reduction of the United Kingdom’s manufacturing base, with traditional industries decimated by globalisation and technological advance. The most noticeable impact was the decline of the male-dominated, manual job within heavy industry, and with it the demise of the apprenticeship route available to young men. By the 1980s the notion of a ‘job for life’ was fading and the labour market was characterised by its insecurity (Capelli 1995; Turnball and Wass (in Heery and Salmon (Eds) 2000)). The doctrine of ‘laissez-faire’ government with its emphasis on the efficacy of the market and stripping away of protective legislation reinforced popular perceptions of job insecurity. Government policy contributed to the expansion of new and more adaptable forms of employment. The demand was for workers who could be ‘hired and fired’ with minimum interference, either through individual or collective labour law (Davis and Freedland 1993).

Amidst this context of labour market change, and in particular the transition from employment in heavily unionised manufacturing industries and the growth of the service sector, it is not difficult to understand how the academic focus shifted away from class as a source of identity. The challenge to class analysis was clear amidst the background of changing conceptions of ‘work’ and the move away from collective identities, more specifically, that working-class man no longer had a meaningful and valid identity. As Savage observes, ‘....the working class had largely been eviscerated as a visible social presence’ (2003: 536). The male, ‘blue collar’ worker, once the irresistible concern of class analysis, went into exile, overshadowed by ‘Essex man’

who signified everything associated with the new individualism, and who would share Thatcherite concerns to 'make Britain Great again'. If men were lamenting the end of the job for life, and the labour market expansion was in part-time, flexible employment, how could work and occupation continue to define class identity?

Politically and economically redundant, the working-class man had outlived his usefulness by the 1980s. Moreover, the identity of the manual worker became tarnished and associated with militancy. Popular representations of the working-class manual worker were on the one hand confrontational and unrealistically demanding of his employer, and on the other hand, as a pathetic relic of former times. Traditional, working-class identity formed in close-knit neighbourhoods and on the shop-floor had, according to 'death of class' protagonists, been replaced by individuals who defined themselves through consumption and cultural choices. Notions of 'class' sat uncomfortably alongside this more fluid society. The former anchors of working-class life, notably the centrality of the local community, were replaced by calls for mobility and versatility.

The social, political and economic context of the 1980s provided the background in which 'death of class' arguments came to the fore. The concept of class itself was one that jarred against what was perceived as an increasingly individualised and fragmented society. When faced with the social and economic changes which started during the 1970s, academics who had once been interested in class, came to see it as diminishing in relevance. The challenges to class can be seen as having their origins in the intellectual trend towards postmodernity and the ideological shift towards diversity and individualism.

## **The postmodern shift from the collective to the individual**

Although as Bottero points out, 'attacks on the concept of class are almost as old as class analysis itself' (2005: 126), the challenge to class analysis in the 1980s developed as part of a wholesale and sweeping rejection of modernist thinking. The decline in the academic interest in social class can be placed within a broader rejection of all that was associated with modernity. The intellectual shift towards individualism was bound up with its wider political and economic context.

The politics associated with the New Right followed a period characterised by State intervention and strong trade unions. However, with the dissolution of what is now referred to as the post-war consensus, with its emphasis on the managed economy and collectivism, the doctrine of the New Right placed importance on the market and individual responsibility. Thatcherite policies drew inspiration from the doctrine of 18<sup>th</sup> century economic liberalism associated with Adam Smith, and adhered to a political ideology which had at its core a belief in freedoms and responsibilities of the individual. As Margaret Thatcher famously declared, 'there is no such thing as society'. This assertion captured a fundamental break; a denunciation of post-war corporatism and all that represented.

With the widespread intellectual turn towards postmodernism, class analysis was being written off as a relic of modern sociological thought. According to Pahl, 'other forms of identity and social consciousness (are) coming to have greater practical relevance' (1989: 716). The concept of postmodernity is highly contested and vaguely-defined, nevertheless its principal arguments centre on the increasingly fragmented and individualised nature of society (Pakulski and Waters 1996; Lash and Urry 1994). Notions of class sit uncomfortably alongside a postmodern

emphasis on diversity, and in Kumar's words, 'the 'collective identities' of class and shared work experiences dissolve into more pluralised and privatised forms of identity. Identity is not unitary or essential, it is fluid and shifting...' (1995: 98 (in Halsey, Lauder, Brown and Wells 1997)). The postmodern ambivalence towards the value of class analysis can be seen therefore in its accent on the individual rather than the collective, and with identities no longer attached to occupationally-defined labels. Instead, individuals are said to construct multiple identities based on consumption, lifestyle and taste preferences. A postmodern world is demarcated by individual 'lifestyles' and values, with socio-economic divisions given less prominence than individual choice.

With greater importance attributed to individual agency, success or failure is a mark of 'individual performativity' (Pakulski and Waters: 1996). In similar vein, Giddens and Beck, although classified as proponents of 'late modernity', place similar emphasis on individuals as active constructors of identity (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). The possession of knowledge, decision-making skills and responsibility for the self become markers of social division. That individuals enjoy varying opportunities to access wealth and resources is not denied, however the focus shifts from the economic to the cultural and from structure to agency. Common to both 'late modernity' and 'post-modernity' is a sense of society as increasingly individualised, with the fading of traditional identities linked to homogenous notions of 'class' or 'gender'. Instead, the individuals in post-modern or late-modern society are engaged as active agents with the freedom to construct 'cut and paste' identities.

The postmodernists' attack on 'class' and its defence by the class analysts in the 1980s and 1990s was a debate which reverberated across the social sciences. Nevertheless, it was a dialogue which surfaced long-standing and fundamental flaws in traditional class-

analysis. As I will discuss below, the emergence of what Savage terms a 'cultural class analysis', owes much to the postmodern challenge. Let me first discuss the debates from which it developed.

### **Talking past each other**

The 'pseudo-debates' referred to by Crompton (2008) are illustrated by the inability of the protagonists to work with consistent definitions of class. As arguably the most vociferous critics, Pakulski and Waters contribute to the muddle, and at the same time, take us to the heart of the weakness in class analysis during the 1980s. Pakulski and Waters assert that they are arguing for 'the radical dissolution' of 'class mechanism....not only the validity and utility of Marxist class theory....'. Nevertheless, their 'four propositions' of class define it in Marxist principles, encapsulating notions of class consciousness, and with class as having the capacity for transformation (1986: 668). Objections to a definition of class that was no longer claimed within the then dominant 'employment aggregate' approach make for a confused debate.

As Crompton notes, 'the 'employment-aggregate' approach was implicitly taken to represent 'class analysis' as a whole' (2008: 73). Described by Pakulski and Waters as 'the contemporary defenders of class', proponents of the 'employment aggregate' approach offered a more 'sober and sombre' version of class analysis, which was class in name only (1986: 684). That the quantitative research projects developed by Goldthorpe and Wright had come to dominate class analysis, contributed to its fading importance. Moreover, in being written off as 'irrelevant' or a 'footnote' is illuminating, and with this belittlement indicating the extent to which class analysis had lost its once central position in the field of sociology. For Savage, the pre-occupation with technical intricacies produced 'intellectual closure which



draws up more narrowly defined research questions and internalised debates' (2000:149). In achieving methodological rigour 'class' became 'a unidimensional economic concept' (Crompton 2008).

What has been described as an 'attenuation' of the class agenda (Morris & Scott 1996), can be seen as a response to previous failures to map out class through large scale research in neighbourhoods, workplaces or communities (for example, the famous studies by Lockwood and Goldthorpe) (Goldthorpe 1968a, 1968b, 1969; Lockwood 1958, 1966). Research in the 1960s and 1970s had failed to reveal collective understandings or beliefs, and in Marxist terms, no 'class consciousness' which would lead to class action. According to Bottero, there was an 'embarrassing absence of clear-cut class identities', with class not articulated as significant in the lives of the researched (2004). Class had slipped off the agenda, and as Savage concedes, there was a paradox: as explaining class consciousness became an elusive goal of empirical research, and the failure to show that class had cultural significance, economic inequalities were deepening (Savage 2000; Devine and Savage 2005).

Although debates as to the continued salience of class were characterised by shifting criteria and tangled definitions, they at least drew attention to the inadequacies which threatened its survival. However, in Goldthorpe's defence of class analysis, which was arguably the most powerful and enduring, there was increasing 'hostility' to its encompassing cultural dimensions (Crompton 2008).

## **Defending class**

Faced with ideological and methodological challenge amidst the postmodern turn, John Goldthorpe and his colleagues defended class on

a more narrowly-conceived understanding than that of his earlier research. With roots in Weberian theory, Goldthorpe's later position was described as having less concern with theory, and with its 'construction and adaptation' having been 'guided by theoretical ideas – but *also* by more practical considerations of the context in which, and the purposes for which, it is to be used and the nature of the data to which it is applied' (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993:46). There was no theory of conflict or historical struggle and no theory of class exploitation. There was no theory of class-based action, 'according to which individuals holding similar positions....act together in pursuit of their common class interests' (Marshall 1997: 51). Whilst Goldthorpe's earlier work was concerned with the cultural dimensions of class, his later work had little to offer by way of cultural perspective. Goldthorpe was interested in the consequences of class location, not social change or class processes.

One of the fiercest challenges to occupationally-derived class schemes can be seen in its perceived inability to accommodate women in their own right. With women's increasing tendency to carry out paid work, the scheme's use of the 'family' rather than the individual as the unit of analysis was argued to render women invisible. However, in defending his class scheme, Goldthorpe countered that he was mirroring the reality of women's relative disadvantage within the labour market, and to position women in their own right would produce a distorted (downwards) picture of their class location. He argued that '...it is difficult to envisage any factors which, over the period in question, would be likely to result in any *sizeable* number of women occupying *markedly* different class positions from those of the male 'heads' of their families (1980a: 287:8).

Although Goldthorpe later conceded that the 'head of household' approach could be male or female, the feminist critique of a class

analysis programme that reduces women (or men) to their family position is understandable at least on ideological grounds. Nevertheless, without taking into account the household as a whole, the classification of women would become entangled with female labour market concentration in routine, service sector and administrative roles. Without denying women's increased labour market participation, and the ability of some women to enjoy professional careers, the contingent nature of women's labour market participation set particular difficulties for class analysis.

Furthermore, the 'employment-aggregate' approach can be seen as having no interest in 'class' beyond demonstrating various statistical associations from the structural locations determined by employment. In his refusal to engage with arguments about social change and broader definitions of inequality, Goldthorpe had nothing new to offer. In defending class analysis without a theory of class, Goldthorpe's approach provided ammunition to those who saw it as having run its course. As Devine notes, the Nuffield approach which came to dominate class analysis in the 1980s had a 'preoccupation with technical issues' and had a very different purpose to former conceptualisations of class (1998:43). Whilst Goldthorpe's earlier work had been concerned with the cultural dimensions of class, by the 1980s he had little to offer by way of cultural perspective and was primarily interested in mapping occupational class associations.

For Goldthorpe, the material and cultural should remain analytically separate. In using 'rational actor theory', Goldthorpe explains how class position remains an important determinant of life chances. However he does not show how individuals subjectively understand class. Goldthorpe is not arguing that different class locations result in different cultural understandings. Rather, he is saying that different class locations lead individuals to construct very different cost-benefit

analyses of their decisions. For example, the decision to have a university education is made not on cultural affinities with higher education, but on an economic assessment of its returns. Whilst Goldthorpe provides statistical data on the persistent inequalities linked to the different positions in the occupational class structure, he does not engage with how class subjectivities are developed. As Savage notes, 'RAT allows Goldthorpe to explain how individuals act in class ways even when they lack developed class awareness' (2000: 85).

This is in many ways an economic model of decision-making, and as Scott argues:

Despite Goldthorpe's continued use of the phrase 'social class', his new categories are not social classes at all.....if the phrase were not likely to cause confusion, Goldthorpe's new categories could be called 'economic classes' (1996: 215-16).

Similarly, as Devine observes, Goldthorpe's account is 'based on an overly economistic view of social action.....' with a 'minimalist view of class' that is based on individual rationality (1998).

In the Nuffield team's defence of the persistence of class as evidenced by class outcomes, they were moving the boundaries, and changing the terms of the class project. Their new and more narrowly-defined agenda could be seen as a consequence of disillusionment; the failure of class analysis to link structure and class identity. Through the inability of studies to show the existence of class consciousness or collective identification, the objectives of the Nuffield approach were to keep the economic basis of class quite separate from the cultural dimensions. Therefore, their agenda was one which asked very different questions and used a quite different methodology to what have become the far more wide ranging concerns of classed practices research. As I will

discuss below, class is being teased out from the emotions and subjectivities of individuals. In its new model, class is claimed through the practices of individuals and families, traced through modes of parenting and styles of consumption.

In drawing this first section to a close, the challenge to class analysis can be summarised as follows. First, this was seen as taking place amidst broader social, political and economic change, and in particular the structural transformation of the labour market. Second, it was part of what has been described as the postmodern turn, and the rejection of modernist thinking. Third, with the defence of class as conceived by the employment-aggregate approach and that very limited agenda. In sum, the challenge to class was as an anachronistic and obsolescent means of analysing individuals' position within society towards the end of the twentieth century, but it was also a response to the direction in which class analysis had been taken; and the very specific failure to show that class had meaning.

This next section discusses how class analysis has returned to the sociological agenda. As I will argue, it is one thing to challenge a particular conception of class, but is quite different to dismiss it in the light of more integrative concepts. Accepting that the employment-aggregate approach became too narrowly-defined, and accepting too that society has undergone significant changes, does not mean that 'class' has disappeared or its effects evaporated. If changes in the structure of the labour market have meant that the working-class/middle-class binary has dissolved into a society whose fault-lines were more widely scattered, then that is not to deny the existence of those lines. So in recognising the inadequacies of class analysis as conceived by the Nuffield approach, the advocates of 'the death of class' argument have contributed to a more fluid and dynamic understanding of class. As Savage observed almost a decade ago, 'the challenge for

class analysis must be to allow a way of examining change as well as persistence' (2000). It is through the work of Pierre Bourdieu that a new and broadened conceptualisation of 'class' has again taken centre stage.

### **Pierre Bourdieu and social class – a symbolic and relational construction**

Whilst 'class' was not Bourdieu's sociological focus, his conceptual trilogy of habitus, capital and field have been used to provide a counter to postmodernist neglect of the structured and material forms of inequality. Bourdieu offers an account of class as embracing the cultural and material, but perhaps more importantly, the symbolic nature of class relationships and practices. Rather than clearly identifiable and bounded divisions, classes are symbolic and relational constructs. A class is 'as much by its *being perceived* as by its *being...*' (1984: 372). For Bourdieu, therefore, classes are not objectively-constructed groups, and are instead, individuals' or groups' awareness of their position in social space.

Bourdieu distinguishes between 'a theoretical class' or 'a class on paper' from the probability of 'a real class'. (1987: 7). He warns that the:

...theoreticist error that you find in Marx, seems to consist in treating classes on paper as real classes, including from the objective homogeneity of conditions, of conditioning, and thus of dispositions, which all come from the identity of position in social space, that the people involved exist as unified group, as a class (Bourdieu: 2004: 129).

Bourdieu's conception of class as about the on-going construction or boundary-making goes against the Marxist theory of structural position leading to class consciousness. If the most problematic issue for traditional class analysis stems from its failure to make clear the relationship between structural location and subjective identity, this is no longer relevant within a Bourdieuan conception. Whereas class analysis sought to show how individuals aligned themselves to a collective class identity, as Savage points out, for Bourdieu, it is 'not based on recognising oneself as belonging to a given position, but as differentiating oneself from others in a field...' (2005: 14).

Therefore, if class is not determined as places in which to position individuals, Bourdieu emphasises instead the active and continuous mechanisms which create classes. Classes are not ready-made constructs and their boundaries are fluid. In this way, rather than looking for action as flowing from objective class position, Bourdieu opens up questions about class processes as captured in the everyday decisions and actions of individuals. The emphasis on class processes enables us to see individuals as actively producing their position in the field, and with the emphasis on practices rather than inert class locations. So, rather than a need to establish links between structure and agency, with Bourdieu, they are part and parcel, mutually constitutive and thus, indivisible.

The usual primacy attributed to occupationally-defined groups is not one given by Bourdieu, and his construction of social space is inhabited by dominant and dominated groups whose relative position is the site of constant negotiation and struggle. Although Bourdieu uses occupational groups in his mapping of taste in *Distinction* (1984), it is difficult to reconcile this methodology with his critique of the 'ready-made' occupational labels as overly-crude measures. Nevertheless, occupational labels are used in that study, and he shows how 'taste' and

aesthetic judgement are mapped onto social space. His findings show how lifestyles are constructed within a hierarchy of widely understood 'good' and 'bad' taste. The possession of 'good taste' is recognised even by those who are unable to display it. Further, the ability of dominant groups to be seen as having good taste disguises the economic and cultural capital on which it is based.

Cultural practices are thus means for distinction and represent claims to legitimacy. Bourdieu describes the dominant class 'distance from necessity', and their choices as representing the pure, aesthetic principles of style. However, the economic capital that provides such 'distance from necessity' is misrecognised as an innate knowledge of good taste. A hierarchy is established, the underlying economic principle of which is misrecognised, through a series of oppositions. Good taste is understood as inherent and natural, and moreover, to be seen as having good taste is only meaningful through its relationship to those who lack it. Being set against the working class taste for the practical and functional, appropriate style is a marker of who you are *not* as much as who you *are*. Therefore the lifestyle choices about such routine and mundane matters of clothing or food consumption act as signifiers of social difference and sites of struggle for legitimacy. Bourdieu argues that these ordinary and everyday decisions about how individuals spend their money and their time provide the arena for class struggle. The working-class life-style is defined as vulgar and tasteless in opposition to the taste for luxury enjoyed by those with sufficient cultural and economic capital. Class identities are established in the contrasts between the dominant and the dominated, with the former successfully imposing cultural choices as superior and legitimate.

In mapping class through culture, Bourdieu is widely criticised for offering a depressing and pessimistic portrayal of working class life, and of failing to adequately differentiate working-class lifestyles (Jenkins



2002; Swartz 1997). Although the working-class habitus is set against the dominant class aesthetic, I suggest that those who argue for a celebration of working-class culture risk neglecting their own privileged perspective. In his presentation of working class culture, Bourdieu encapsulates the invidious and all-pervasive ways in which class struggles are played out. Rather than a proud collectivity, working class culture is routinely vilified, and represented as synonymous with lacking. Bad taste or the absence of style has become widely-used shorthand for popular forms of working-class denigration, and is vividly captured by the television character of Vicky Pollard (BBC's Little Britain). Disdain for working-class lifestyles is encapsulated within this comedic caricature, the humour of which stems from knowing you are not like *that*. So, for Bourdieu, the working class is not celebrated and it is positioned as other to those able to claim authority and whose values are seen as legitimate. The differences between 'us' and 'them' are constructed through the representational and symbolic, and as Swartz notes, 'class-boundary institutionalization depends on the relative symbolic power of particular groups to impose as legitimate their vision of the social divisions in society' (1997: 148).

Bourdieu's interest in cultural and lifestyle choices shares postmodern concerns to use consumption as its focus. However, through the concept of capital, Bourdieu provides an important counter to the postmodernist notion of choice and diversity of consumption practices. At the heart of Bourdieu's conception of class is the understanding that individuals hold different volumes of capital, which are like 'bargaining chips'; or resources which can be deployed or exchanged. With the concept of capital, Bourdieu is thus able to map individuals onto social space. Individuals seek to maintain or enhance their position in social space by using or exchanging their stock of economic, cultural or social capital. Through the device of capital, Bourdieu is able to explain therefore how individuals are engaged in the struggle for distinction,

and most importantly, how the possession of capital is misrecognised in that process. In order to understand Bourdieu's emphasis on the on-going construction of class, the forms of capital have to be understood alongside habitus and field. These concepts are central to the Bourdieuan notion of class, and their relationship provides an analytical device with which to see class as a dynamic process. Let me now turn to explore these two concepts in some detail.

## **Habitus**

The concept of habitus provides a mediating device between structure and agency. It offers the promise of showing how class is lived and experienced through individual subjectivities. Although the notion of habitus has been described as overly-deterministic, its attempt is to show how the individual is a socialised individual, and through living in society, an embodiment of its structures. The habitus is a 'structuring structure', and through it we can understand how individuals' dispositions and subjective responses serve to reinforce objective structures. In contrast to postmodern conceptions of reflexive and transient identities, habitus captures the past, present and future: individuals are neither reduced to structurally designated slaves, nor free to construct their own biographies.

Thus, the intention of habitus is its transcending the duality of structure and agency, and as '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). Although in some ways similar to traditional notions of 'socialisation', the distinctive nature of habitus is its being embodied. Individuals' early experiences provide its foundation, which are then accumulated layer upon layer. These early

encounters thus predispose individuals to act in classed ways, but without being conscious of their doing so. Habitus generates the 'feel for the game' or the 'natural' response. In this sense, the attempt to find links between structure and agency is no longer necessary. Where earlier attempts to 'identify' class consciousness failed, within a Bourdieuan framework, individuals are not required to articulate class subjectivities, merely to *act* in classed ways.

Through their position in social space, individuals develop a habitus which disposes them to make certain choices over others. The habitus operates 'below the level of consciousness' and predisposes individuals to behave in ways that are seemingly the most obvious and natural. Through the concept of habitus we can see how class is lived and experienced intuitively and subjectively. Through habitus, Bourdieu is able to shift the focus of class from the formal, public and organised sites of identity construction to individuals' informal, private and more broadly scattered sources of identity.

Nevertheless, habitus remains a contested concept with a multiplicity of meanings (Reay 2004). Among those who align themselves to a Bourdieuan framework, there are considerable differences as far as the extent to which habitus incorporates reflexivity. Reay, for example, argues for an extension of the concept to incorporate individual reflections and self-questioning. Citing Crossley's development of habitus to include the capacity for individuals to act reflexively, she argues that habitus needs to include 'dialogues with oneself' (Crossley 2000: 138) (Reay 2004). Similarly, for Sweetman, the habitus may be characterised by reflexivity and flexibility, which he sees as 'increasingly common due to various economic, social and cultural shifts....' (2003). Sweetman points to changes in the labour market and the fragmented nature of the 'career'. He argues that Bourdieu's concept of habitus relied on 'relatively stable social conditions...', and that 'his analysis may

thus be said to apply more to simple or organised modernity' (ibid). For Sweetman then, a reflexive habitus is demanded by the disintegration of careers and the concomitant anxieties of postmodern society. I suggest that the call for habitus to be extended to incorporate greater reflexivity is misplaced. To argue for new or increased reflexivity is to decouple habitus from field, moreover, to neglect their mutually constitutive relationship. The tendency to detach habitus from field risks reducing its conceptual potential, and above all, introduces a mechanical sterility in place of the practical logic which underpins Bourdieu's endeavour.

In response to the frequently-asked question of whether habitus rules out 'strategic choice and conscious deliberation', Bourdieu responds that 'the habitus may very well be accompanied by strategic calculation of costs and benefits, which tends to carry out at a conscious level the operations that habitus carries out in its own way' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:131). Therefore, the potency of the concept of habitus lies in its taken-for-granted and unthinking awareness of possibilities and ways of behaving. The individual habitus is central to the reproduction of advantage and disadvantage, with 'class' made and re-made by agents' unquestioning practices and by doing what 'people like them' have always done. Described as 'internalised dispositions' habitus is a product of socialisation as children grow to understand what is 'for them' and what is 'for others'. A perception of the world is shaped by the family place within the social structure, and in the processes of socialisation individuals learn what hopes and aims are reasonable, as 'objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits, sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, place and so forth from which one is excluded' (Bourdieu 1984: 471). Certain decisions are conceived as 'out of bounds', 'not for the likes of us'. Individual choices and actions structure understandings of cultural practices, without

individuals having to articulate those decisions in explicitly classed ways. Social structures are embodied, with individuals acquiring an understanding of their place relative to others. As Reay observes:

Habitus can be used to focus on the ways in which the socially advantaged and disadvantaged play out attitudes of cultural superiority and inferiority ingrained in their habitus in daily interactions (2004:436).

### **Habitus – continuity and change?**

Habitus has been widely criticised for its inability to account for change. I argue that such claims are made on only a partial reading of Bourdieu's work. Although for the purposes of clarity it is usual to discuss habitus, capital and field separately, they are inter-relational concepts, with the intersections offering the most promise. As I will explore through my own empirical research, in developing habitus to encompass cultural capital, layers of knowledge and experience provide the individual with the tools for change. Habitus is open to *possibilities* and *potentials* rather than fixed certainties. Although individuals' behaviours may be seen as patterned, to say that they follow a pre-programmed destiny overlooks that habitus includes the 'permanent capacity for invention' (Bourdieu 1990b:63). This possibility becomes clearer when looking at individuals encountering new fields:

...the product of social conditionings, and thus of a history (unlike *character*) is endlessly transferred, either in a direction that reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectation encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with these expectations, or in a direction that transforms it and, for instance,

raises or lowers the levels of expectation and aspirations  
(1990b:116)

Entry to a new field can be seen as providing the opportunity for habitus to change as individuals are confronted by the unfamiliar. That is not to say that habitus will *necessarily* change in response to the field, but that the potential is always there. I suggest that habitus is a never-ending process of construction, with individuals' biographies and stocks of capital in constant tension or alignment with the field. Habitus captures the dynamic and relational nature of class processes. For Bourdieu, individuals are always positioned relative to others, and rather than those positions fixed forever, they vary at different times and in different places.

If habitus is to be of most use, then it is in reminding us of the subjective dimension of social class, that is, individuals' embodiment of structures beyond the labels affixed to them. It is here we see most clearly the distinction between what habitus offers in contrast to the more agency-focussed concept of 'identity'. The interest in identity work in educational research (Coffey: 2001) emphasises how individuals are free to construct and shape the way they see themselves and are seen by others. In giving primacy to active identity construction we risk attributing too great a capacity for agency, as if individuals are free to try out different identities. Habitus fastens the subject more firmly to social structures.

## **Field**

As Grenfell and James note, 'if habitus brings into focus the subjective end of the equation, field focuses on the objective' (1998: 15).

Bourdieu's concept of 'field' is a structured space, yet it is a space which

relies upon individuals' willingness to accept its rules and play its particular game. So, for example, the field of higher education constitutes a set of universities and colleges which are represented through league tables and more informal hierarchical understandings of their relative positions. However, the structure of that field is produced and reproduced by the institutions', parents' and students' willingness to accept the stakes on offer.

The field of education functions through the ability of the middle classes to reproduce existing advantage, and at the same time for the middle classes to believe it offers prizes worth struggling for. Entry to higher education is understood as desirable and achievable for those with the requisite intellectual abilities. However, for Bourdieu, notions of the educational field as operating through meritocratic principles are flawed. Instead, the field of education is a field in which dominant groups maintain their advantage through a veneer of meritocracy. The concept of field offers Bourdieu a means of explaining how capital is differently valued and transferable across different sites. Fields become fields of struggle, and sites of symbolic violence as individuals seek to determine the stakes worth having.

Thus, the concept of field conveys both the objective and symbolical structures that divide social space. Fields become places of domination, with individuals or groups occupying positions according to their accumulation of capital. However, the symbolic value of capital is subject to variation from field to field, with each field reinforcing the capital of those who dominate it. As Swartz notes, the 'fundamental logic of symbolic distinction operates socially and politically as well as culturally; it functions to differentiate and legitimate inegalitarian and hierarchical arrangements' (1997: 86). The concept of 'symbolic violence' explains how individuals and groups struggle to dominate a

particular field and impose meaning or judgement according to the capital of those at its centre.

Having looked at the theoretical framework and conceptual tools constructed by Bourdieu I will now consider how he has influenced contemporary debates around social class. I will first consider how feminists have drawn from Bourdieu to accent the emotional dimension to class, and how in doing so, how they have developed new sites for class analysis. I will then discuss the way in which Savage has used Bourdieu as a means to reconcile class with hesitant and ambivalent class identities (Savage et al 2001).

## **Feminist approaches**

Feminist approaches have extended and enriched the conceptualisation of class through a Bourdieuan framework. The contribution is characterised above all by a greater emphasis on the subjective and emotional dimensions of class. Moreover, it is in the feminist interpretations of Bourdieu that we see articulated most clearly how the notion of exploitation might be reconsidered. Exploitation becomes centred on claims to respectability and entitlement to be seen as an individual rather than an 'other' (Skeggs: 1997; 2004; 2005). This is a 'very intimate form of exploitation', and for women, class is about having the authority, or the moral legitimacy to make judgements. Thus, for Skeggs, exploitation remains a central feature of the new conceptualisation of class. However, it is exploitation whose definition is more broadly conceived than through traditional class analysis. These are more subtle and private forms of exploitation. They are explored through the construction of identities and practices as legitimate or lacking. Exploitation is caught up with the symbolic



dimensions of class, and one which is about holding or not holding the dominant, legitimate forms of capital.

Whilst earlier models of class analysis defined exploitation through the public world of work, feminists have introduced ways of looking at the gendered nature of exploitation. To be working class and female is not to belong to a proud collectivity, but instead to be positioned as 'other' to the respectable middle-class. For the women in Skeggs' research, the power of class was evidenced through their struggle to be seen as respectable. Not that they wanted to be seen as middle-class, 'hoity-toity' or 'posh'. Rather, they needed to avoid being labelled with working-class identities, which were associated with shame and lacking, set against middle-class decency and knowledge (Skeggs: 1997).

Similarly, Lawler presents a compelling case for the way that class and gender are implicated. Her emphasis is on the symbolic violence inflicted by those in positions of power. Lawler argues that the representation of working class women is bound up with distaste and fear, and moreover, how social inequality is transformed into individual pathology (Lawler 2005). In Paulsgrove, working-class women protestors against paedophiles were seen as disgusting and unworthy mothers. In Oxford, middle-class mothers were depicted as responsible and caring. Lawler draws attention to the language used to define middle-class respectability in opposition to fear and distrust of the working-class female marked as repellent and disgusting by her clothes and body. As Lawler notes, 'class is linguistically expunged', and the blame for poverty or exclusion is directed at the behaviour or ignorance of the poor (ibid).

Lawler argues that identity is not just something that people experience, but it is something that others impose upon them. She cites the example of 'chavs' and questions whether anyone would deliberately

choose that identity. Above all, feminist workings of Bourdieu draw out attention to the double disadvantage of being working-class and female. Class is played out through the dimensions of the emotions (Reay 2004), with female class identities encompassing personally-felt understandings of difference. Thus, in the feminist extension of Bourdieu, there is an emphasis on the ways in which classed practices extend beyond decision-making and incorporate feelings, attitudes and behaviours generated through habitus.

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to first discuss how Bourdieu has been used to develop the concept of 'ordinariness' as evidence of the implicit and enduring nature of class. I will therefore turn my attention to what is perhaps the most innovative development of Bourdieu, and as a means to reconcile class and individualised identities. Secondly, I will consider the issues arising from Bottero's critique of the Bourdieuan inspired class agenda.

## **Being ordinary**

Ambivalent class identity and the desire to be 'ordinary' is seen by Mike Savage as compatible with a broad interpretation of a Bourdieuan class framework (Savage et al 2001). One of the ways that Savage has taken up Bourdieu's ideas is to find a way through a lasting paradox: the existence of class without the articulation of class identity. Savage replaces the Bourdieuan notion of 'distinction' with the desire for ordinariness. Although at first sight some distance from the Bourdieuan project, it is a skilful manoeuvre, and one that addresses this long-standing problem in class analysis. Savage argues that Bourdieu allows us to accept that individualised or weak class identities do not deny the existence of class (Devine, Savage, Crompton and Scott 2005; Crompton 2008). The need to be seen as ordinary is a desire to be

*someone* and *not* someone else. Indeed, the call to ordinariness reveals the power of class through the classificatory processes of self and others, with articulations of class revealed through individuals' desire to 'resist the domination of cultural capital' (ibid 2005).

Consequently, the argument for individualised class identities as defined by the 'ordinary' introduces a marked shift in focus. It fundamentally alters the way in which class subjectivities are understood. To be defined as 'ordinary' becomes an assertion of an identity which is untainted by the judgement of others. The claim to being 'ordinary' rather than 'middle-class' offers a powerful statement on the sensitivities and morality bound up with class, and reminds us of Sayer's observation that class remains an embarrassing subject (2002). Thus in individuals' refusal of classification, we can gain an indication of its continued, but unwelcome presence. The desire to be seen as ordinary is an attempt to shrug off class labels as potentially destructive markers, because to be described through the language of class threatens to invite disparaging and injurious comment.

Moreover, the stifling of class identities does not deny the awareness of classed inequalities. To assert an 'ordinary' identity is to invoke tacit recognition of society as structured through relations of material and cultural difference. To be ordinary is to stake a position against relationships above and below. Thus, an ordinary identity is therefore not simply one that is available to all, rather it is a statement of having a certain cultural, moral and financial normalcy. All this brings into mind the colloquial nomenclatures used by the Government such as 'middle-England' and 'hard-working parents', and which have become popular representations of those who are *not* something else. Appeals to ordinariness are therefore claims to being normal or typical rather than too high or low in the social spectrum. The language of ordinariness

evokes images of reasonable and unaffected behaviour as opposed to falseness and pretension.

Thus, with the resistance to class labels, the new model of class focuses on the individual, and in particular, has its reference point the middle-class individual. According to Savage, 'socially recognised class conflict dissipates into individualised identities in which those who live up to middle class norms see themselves as 'normal' people' (Savage 2003: 536). It is these everyday practices and decisions of so-called ordinary people that have provided the starting point for the new class agenda. So at the heart of the development of a classed practices approach is the aim, in Savage's words, to dissect 'the innocence, the kind of unacknowledged normality of the middle-class' (ibid: 537). Educational decision-making, especially, has presented itself as fertile terrain on which to explore classed practices, and in the next chapter I will explore what this literature offers in our understanding of the middle-class. As undeniably impressive and influential, the development of this classed practices agenda is one that leaves some important questions unresolved. As I discuss below, if these new, individualised versions of class are to be explored through accounts of classed practices, then it remains unclear as to whether the concept of class as traditionally conceived has been distorted beyond recognition.

### **Classed practices – a fundamental break?**

The movement from traditional conceptualisations of class to what Savage has described as a 'new class paradigm' (ibid), is in many ways a marked shift, but in others, a continuation of what went before. In its engagement with a Bourdieuan framework, the new ways of talking about class rely not on positive articulations of class identity, but

instead on class implicit through tastes and preferences. However, the continued tendency of new conceptions to use the language of exploitation and conflict is seen by Bottero as a problematic legacy (2004; 2005). Instead, Bottero argues for a 'fundamental break' with class categories that incorporate exploitation, seeing this as an unhelpful remnant of the old conception of class. With her assertion that '...hierarchical inequality is not, in itself, a form of exploitation....'. Bottero argues that 'it is a mistake to characterise such processes as class conflict or exclusion....' (ibid 993-995) and in differentiating between exploitation and inequality, Bottero goes to the nub of the problem. For Bottero, whilst class is a contested concept and one that is capable of embracing different interpretations, for the model to use the language of class and exploitation for what is instead hierarchical inequality represents a 'slippage' (ibid). Thus Bottero challenges the new model's use of 'class' vocabulary.

However, rather than being central to 'old' class analysis as such, exploitation is arguably the defining feature of a specifically *Marxist* model of class. So it has to be assumed that either Bottero's argument is based on a broader interpretation of exploitation, or that she is taking the Marxist model as a universal conceptualisation of class. I take her argument to mean 'exploitation' as a more broadly-defined characteristic of traditional class analysis, rather than a specifically Marxist conceptualisation. According to Bottero, it is wrong to label (as exploitation), 'the routine, mundane, and unobjectionable ways in which such objectionable outcomes occur' (ibid 994), and her argument hinges not on those 'objectionable outcomes' but instead the '*unobjectionable* ways' in which those are achieved. According to Bottero, the classed practices agenda, with its reliance on the 'tacit reproduction of hierarchy', must be distinguished from 'explicit and self-conscious activities' (ibid 996). If individuals do not articulate an explicit class identity, then how can we interpret their behaviours as

exploitative? Thus Bottero has drawn attention to what is perhaps an uncomfortable truth: the new classed practices model has been unable to completely free itself from the dominance of older forms of class analysis.

The questions raised by Bottero invite us to take stock. Class is back on the agenda, and a Bourdieuan vocabulary has become the currency with which to develop a distinctive classed practices approach.

Nevertheless, with its further advancement, there are important issues to resolve. By exploring the treatment of middle-class educational decision-making, and in taking up the questions raised by Bottero, this thesis aims to contribute to the further development of classed practices research.

### **Setting a new agenda**

The aim of this chapter has been to discuss how traditional class analysis slipped from the main sociological agenda. Through the widespread appropriation of Pierre Bourdieu's trilogy of habitus, capital and field, he offers a way to talk and write about class through the practices of everyday life. So, from the widespread declaration of its death, class is now back, albeit it in the guise of classed practices. The new focus offered by classed practices is one which draws our attention to the middle-class, and with their having become what Savage describes as the 'particular-universal' class, Bourdieu's conceptual framework has penetrated that veneer of ordinariness. But further work is needed to understand what lies behind this quiet dominance. In setting up an opposition between a powerful middle-class and a weakened working class, we must avoid making assumptions and skating over the surface of that dominant middle-class. Thus the focus of this thesis is on the middle-class, and how they are represented through the new model of classed practices.

Hence, it is the 'routine, mundane and unobjectionable' practices which provide the focus of this thesis. As I will outline in the next chapter, it is the educational practices which will provide the context for this discussion. The way in which parents and young people are represented within the educational classed practices literature offers some broader understanding as to whether the classed practices paradigm should be seen as an extension of the old, or instead as a new and distinctive model of class. To what extent can middle-class young people's university participation be understood through the language of class? Do the interventions of middle-class parents constitute exploitation? Furthermore, is it appropriate to continue to address classed practices through binary oppositions?

I conclude therefore that the definition of class remains contested and confusing, and that the questions raised by Bottero are important points to resolve. Moreover, through exploring how the middle-class is represented through the new model of class, we can begin to disentangle these issues. The aim of this thesis is, through working with Bourdieu's conceptual framework, to emphasise 'practice'. In doing so, I endeavour to deconstruct the middle classes as represented in classed practices research, and through exploring their 'routine, mundane and unobjectionable' *educational* practices, contribute to the development of this new class paradigm.

## **Chapter 2: Educational decision-making as a classed practice**

### **Introduction**

Education has traditionally offered a rich terrain for sociologists interested in class, and in recent years, with the emergence of what Mike Savage describes as a 'new kind of cultural class analysis', there has been widespread engagement with educational practices as a means to explore how class is lived and understood by individuals (Ball 2003; Savage 2003). Notably, it has been argued that the educational practices of the middle-class have provided a key site for class relations to be played out.

The aims of this chapter are as follows. Firstly, to evaluate the literature on educational classed practices inspired by the conceptual framework provided by Pierre Bourdieu. The chapter traces some of the key themes and perspectives that have dominated the recent agenda for understanding class through the study of educational practices. In particular, I will focus on the emphasis on parents' and students' educational decision-making. The chapter identifies key problems with the way in which educational classed practices have been articulated through a Bourdieuan paradigm. The chapter explores how these issues may be addressed within the context of my own empirical research. My case study makes a distinctive contribution to the field, and moreover, explores issues which have been neglected within what has become the dominant educational classed practices paradigm mapped out largely by Stephen Ball and Diane Reay (1998; 1998a; 2000; 2004; 2005).



Focusing on literature that has spanned school choice and university decision-making, this chapter discusses themes which extend across the body of work. First, it considers how middle-class parents are represented, and in particular how their intervention and involvement is treated within the literature. Second, it explores how the university decisions of young people have been conceptualised as classed choices.

The literature reviewed here focuses on the way in which Bourdieu, and specifically the concepts of habitus, capital and field, has offered a framework in which to address 'class'. In working with these concepts, the research is marked by a clear movement away from class as labels to affix to individuals, towards class as implicit and embedded within both the ordinary and significant decisions of everyday life.

Nevertheless, and as I contend in chapter one, definitions remain 'contested and confusing'. In the emergence of a new model of class as defined by practices, there is an unwillingness to abandon the traditional vocabulary of class. Instead, the classed practices project stands in parallel, running alongside and continually rubbing against the classical legacy.

As I concluded in the previous chapter, further work is needed to understand what lies behind the quiet dominance of what Savage defines as the 'particular-universal' middle-class. The transition from school to university provides rich terrain in which to explore classed practices during a period of flux. These practices are being enacted at a time when the traditional routes from university to a middle-class career have become less certain. As I will discuss below, the choice of university takes on ever more significance. For these reasons, perhaps more than any, education offers the site in which to explore how this quiet dominance is played out. I decided therefore that the field of education would enable me to explore how the middle-class make, and make sense of their decisions. As such, the practices of parents and

students provide a means to explore their responses to a dynamic field. Furthermore, in addressing educational practices, the thesis engages with the principles and vocabulary of the new class model.

### **Educational practices within a context of higher education expansion and differentiation.**

In order to understand these classed practices in relation to the field, let me now sketch out the main characteristics of the United Kingdom's higher education system in the early twenty-first century. The transformation in higher education has been profound: once the preserve of the male-dominated elite, the United Kingdom is now considered to have a system of mass higher education. From the policy prescriptions which emerged from the Robbins report of 1963, the expansion of higher education provision remains an important policy of successive governments, with a regular restatement of commitment to 'increase participation towards 50 per cent of those aged 18-30' (DfES 2003). Higher education is no longer seen as an exclusive privilege for the few, and taken at face value, participation statistics offer some measure of success: only 2.7% of 18 year olds went on to higher education in 1938, compared with a 'young participation rate' of 31.6% in 2006. (DfES 2006).

However, if one measure of success of the policy to widen participation may be claimed through sheer volume of participation, such rates provide only a small piece of the jigsaw and give no indication of the diverse and differentiated nature of that participation. Behind the rhetoric of government policy is a fragmented and deeply-structured field. Masked by the relentless drive towards mass participation, the field of higher education is chaotic, but at the same time enduringly hierarchical: a jumble of institutions offering qualitatively very different rewards and experiences for its students. Furthermore, the vocabulary

associated with 'university' has become too blunt and too crude an expression of what is in fact a highly diverse and disparate experience.

Prior to 1992, the United Kingdom's higher education provision was comprised of two relatively distinctive types of institution, with polytechnics typically focussing on teaching and offering vocational degrees. Universities, in contrast, were research-led, concentrating on traditional, academic subjects and 'high status' vocational subjects such as medicine and law. Despite the removal of what is termed the 'binary divide' in 1992, the field of higher education remains stratified in terms of the perceived quality and status of institution. The higher education field is now site to a battle between elitism and accessibility, and those divisions remain, even if the territory has become murky and its lines unclear.

The educational practices of parents and students are widely seen as a response to a higher education system which has expanded and diversified. Despite the removal of the so-called binary divide, university provision remains hierarchical, with 'old' universities synonymous with 'good', 'proper' and 'traditional' institutions. In the transition from an elite system to a mass system of higher education, the middle-classes are said to be 'intensifying efforts' towards securing advantage for their children amidst fears of increased competition (Ball 2003). Middle-class practices are being played out alongside the diversification and 'massification' of the university system. According to Ball, parents are engaged in 'planning and futurity' to provide their children with 'positional advantage', as the return on a university education is no longer assured (ibid). A dominant research theme argues that in the unravelling of the relationship between education and the labour market, middle-class parents and their children will mobilise cultural, economic and social capital to gain the competitive edge. Thus, with an increasingly 'anxious' middle-class (ibid), university

participation, and particularly participation at 'elite' universities, provides the means for middle-class reproduction of existing advantage.

The question of how middle-class students dominate the more prestigious universities stands in stark contrast to policy rhetoric which continues to endorse the value of higher education and its universal benefits. The relationship between holding a degree and its return in the labour market is embedded within an official discourse premised on the growing needs of a knowledge-based economy. The widening participation agenda is based on a promise of advantages for the economy, society and individual students, and the present Government's White Paper (2009) sets out a vision of upward social mobility gained through 'better jobs and fairer chances', with graduates claimed to earn 'on average comfortably over £100,000 more than a similar individual with just A-levels' (Education and Skills: Widening Participation in Higher Education' (2008).

However, this promise of financial and labour market rewards from a university education has not been accepted uncritically. As the first generation of fee-paying students graduate into a precarious labour market, the benefits of a degree are subject to both popular and academic challenge. There is now a widespread perception that a degree is not 'enough'. The possession of an undergraduate qualification is not in itself the means to secure access to purported labour market rewards. As Power and Whitty contend, 'these blanket assertions ignore the extent to which particular kinds of higher education confer differential advantages' (2008), and similarly Brown and Lauder call into question the apparently universal rate of return on a graduate qualification, which they argue masks differences between graduates (2004). Similar points are made from the analysis of graduate incomes by Machin and Vignoles (2005). What this research highlights above all

is the very variable returns from a degree in opposition to the policy rhetoric of university offering uniform benefits.

That the degree is not sufficient to ensure access to a 'middle-class' career challenges the dominant discourse of the last two decades of higher education expansion. With an overcrowded labour market the rewards from a degree are now more closely linked to individuals' possession of 'elite credentials' denoted by their subject or institution. Having explored the correlations between a degree and its financial returns in the labour market, the research (referred to above) contends that the classification of degree, subject and awarding institution serve to differentiate the benefits available to the individual. Holding a particular degree from a specific university offers individuals the competitive edge, which is now an 'essential commodity that must be fought through the mobilisation of all the financial, cultural and social capital that families can muster.....' (Brown & Lauder 2006: 50). Thus it is argued that lost in the drive towards 'mass' participation is the reality of a labour market that offers finite rewards, and with credentials conferring value only in relation to the extent that others do or do not possess them. The returns on a degree are relative and contingent rather than a universal good.

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 literature as better able and more willing to engage in the active and strategic working of the system to benefit their children (Ball 2003; Devine 2004; Reay et al 2005). Indeed it is the emphasis on middle-class parents' strategic response to increased competition which characterises much recent research. Writing both collaboratively and individually, Stephen Ball, Diane Reay and colleagues have established an impressive presence in the field, and I would like to take up some of the themes raised through their

particular contributions, as well as discussing how their research adds to the 'classed practices' research more broadly conceived.

This chapter is thus continuing the discussion which began in the first chapter. Having explored how Bourdieu has driven the contemporary interest in class, this chapter reviews research which has contributed to its development into what Savage terms a 'new class paradigm' (2003). Further, in having identified the middle-class as significant players within the new agenda, this chapter considers how they are represented through the literature.

Education decision-making is a powerful means of viewing how class is lived and experienced by individuals. Moreover, educational decisions bring together the public and private dimensions of class. For example, through university destinations, we see clearly the very public and visible rewards of classed practices. However, through the accounts of decision-making, we hear the stories behind those outcomes. Consequently, the chapter develops from a broad concern to understand the middle-class through their *educational* practices, and in its conclusion, draws together the questions that will be addressed through my own study.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I consider how middle-class parents are depicted through the literature, and in doing so I engage with the broader questions raised by Bottero (2004; 2005). Secondly, I consider how the young middle-class are presented through their university decisions. In doing so, I argue that their representation accentuates the partial way in which Bourdieu has been appropriated.

## **A uniform representation of the middle-class**

The practices of middle-class parents provide the focus for much of the existing research in this field, and even when its concern is on university decision-making the emphasis tends to be on parents rather than young people. As I will discuss further below, the voices of middle-class young people are mostly absent from the literature. Instead, there is a tendency to represent them as embodiments of their parents' resources, symbols of their parental class location rather than fully-formed and three-dimensional individuals in their own right. Before discussing young people's university decision-making, let me first explore how their parents are represented through the literature.

Literature on classed practices has its focus on middle-class rather than working-class parents. Indeed, the 'classed practices' agenda has been dominated by an interest in the middle-class, and this is an accent which rectifies a previous neglect. However, more than addressing a gap in research, the very notion of class as defined through 'practice' is one that sits comfortably and easily alongside the middle-class as research subjects. The notion of 'classed practices' embraces more than habits and routines, and the term carries with it evocations of the 'active' as opposed to the 'passive' individual. The connotations imbued through classed practices are bound up with a dominant conceptualisation of middle-class engagement with education. Moreover, this is a relationship that stands in stark contrast to the passivity or refusal which characterises research into working class parents' educational decision-making, and which is 'infused by ambivalence, fear and a resistance to invest too much...' (Reay & Ball 1997: 89).

As I will discuss below, there is then, an overwhelming emphasis on middle-class parents' skilful navigation of their children's pathways through the education system. Dominant arguments are framed within crude binaries of middle-class advantage set against working-class disadvantage; the literature offering what might be described as an overly-homogenous or essentialist version of the middle-class. Furthermore, particular kinds of middle-class practice are conveyed as general and uniform: for example, in their representation as knowledgeable decision-makers, and moreover, through practices characterised by certainty and entitlement. Above all, there is a tendency to accentuate coarse differences rather than probe fine distinctions.

Stephen Ball's study of middle-class educational decision-making has been particularly influential and draws from research across the educational trajectory (Ball 2003). According to Mike Savage, the study offers 'a key reference point for future discussion' (Savage 2003:539). What has been achieved through this research is, in effect, a convergence of interests in educational inequalities and social class. This has produced fresh contexts in which to explore how class is experienced through practices rather than openly articulated. That Savage acknowledges the significance of this contribution is indicative of the role of educational practices in contributing to the development of the new class model.

Nevertheless, Ball's research paints broad brush strokes rather than fine detail. Consequently there is a gap and something of a contraction between the articulated aims and its substance. Although the subheading of Ball's study is 'the middle classes and social advantage', he acknowledges that his research is focused on the middle-class as more narrowly defined by the 'salaried' or 'service-class' (2003). Moreover, he concedes that his study offers a more 'general analysis of



middle-class formation and reproduction....', and with the 'examination of class fractions as beyond the scope of this current exercise' (ibid 190). The subtlety of the footnote is lost amongst the forceful and animated arguments that characterise his work. Nevertheless its importance should not be overlooked. With the focus of Ball's study on binary differences, there is a danger of writing out the stories of those whose position in the field is more ambiguous. In effect, the risk is to obscure all but the outer regions of the field, and to therefore expose only its extremes. The middle-class parents illustrated by Ball offer convincing illustrations of privilege to oppose working-class disadvantage, but they do little to explain the nuances and finer distinctions. Unhelpful oppositions are constructed between the overwhelmingly successful upper reaches of the middle-class set in contrast to the equally undifferentiated working class. In setting up such a construction, Ball in effect 'writes out' the huge swathe of those defined through their occupations as belonging to the 'intermediate' and 'lower-middle-class'.

Although Reay makes this distinction, between what she terms as the 'established' and 'novitiate' middle-class (who it is argued map 'loosely' onto Bernstein's 'old' and 'new' middle-class), her narrative too is one primarily describing the practices of a unitary middle-class (Reay et al 2005, Bernstein 1996). Unlike Power et al's use of the Bernsteinian concept of 'instrumental' and 'expressive' frameworks to analyse how 'old' and 'new' fractions of the middle-class form distinctive preferences for school cultures, very little attention is given to exploring the differences between Reay's 'established' and 'novitiate' middle-class (Power et al 2003). These fractions are said to be determined by 'family history, capitals, skills and dispositions', but there is no fine-grained analysis of the parents' tastes or behaviours beyond their being middle-class. The thrust of Reay's argument is that the newcomers simply work harder at their middle-class reproduction (2005: 15).

Both Reay and Ball describe their middle-class parents as 'advantaged' or 'privileged' in opposition to working-class parents' disadvantage. They draw on Bourdieuan concepts of cultural and social capital to deconstruct notions of generalised advantage, and moreover, to introduce a more complex model of decision-making than that otherwise offered by rational action theory. However, in the emphasis on the cultural dimensions of decision-making there is limited attention to the underlying economic resources. Perhaps the reluctance to accent the economic is an overly-cautious fear of reducing practices to reflections of class location. However in their neglect of the economic dimensions of practice, there is a danger of overlooking that economic capital is at the heart of Bourdieu's account of inequality. Indeed, although Bourdieu's aim is to find a way between economic and cultural explanations of inequality, economic capital is at the 'root' of all forms of capital, but 'never entirely reducible' to it (Bourdieu: 1986: 54). Therefore, economic capital is of primary importance, and as a means of enabling the acquisition of cultural and social capital. However, the relationship between economic and the other forms of capital is not made clear by Reay and Ball, so it has to be an assumption that their middle-class parents' use of cultural and social capital stems from high levels of economic capital associated with their middle-class occupations.

Consequently, whilst Reay and Ball draw attention to the capital supporting practices which give 'the edge', this capital is broadly defined. Whilst drawing on the Bourdieuan terminology of 'capitals', rather little is known about the way in which these capitals are translated into advantage. In particular, the role of 'cultural capital' is emphasised, but this is defined very generally. Furthermore, as Lareau and Weininger note, there is no consensus as to the definition of cultural capital (2003) and it has been used to incorporate participation in high culture, which they define as its 'prestige' or 'status' component,

alongside a separate 'skills' or 'ability' component. The breadth of its meaning and the variety of ways in which cultural capital has been operationalized suggests that cultural capital has become so broad as to elude any meaningful empirical work.

Furthermore, with Reay incorporating embodied and affective dimensions which are more usually understood as 'habitus', we are left with what is arguably more recognisable as a synthesis of capitals and habitus. As such, the potential for conceptual clarity is left unrealised. What might offer a more differentiated account of middle-class privilege achieved through multiple forms of advantage, risks disappearing into an amalgam of an overly-simplistic and vague concept of generalised 'advantage' and 'confidence'. Nonetheless, with the fusing of capital and habitus through Reay's interpretation we are given access to the private and usually hidden world of the parents. Undoubtedly the combination of capital and habitus add yet a further layer of complexity, but these fuzzy, emotional and haphazard articulations of the habitus are vivid portrayals of classed practice in its widest conceptualisation. There are moments when habitus emerges in Reay's accounts. For example, the simple, innocent expressions of choice, beautifully encapsulated by one mother's account of her daughter's Cambridge college: 'It seemed so Helena'. However, these are rare moments, which are submerged in the dominant account of strategic intervention (Reay et al 2005).

Reay's account of parents' decision-making provides a vivid portrayal of the behaviours and desires of the middle-class which occasionally represented through the routines and instincts of parenting. More generally though, they are conveyed as calculated and strategic practices. At the same time, and as I will discuss later in this chapter, these are sometimes overtly and sometimes implicitly defined as exploitation. Parental interventions are on the one hand, emotionally-charged and deeply-felt responses, and on the other, strategic

calculations to maximise advantage. Hence, Reay's account draws attention to the diverse forms of middle-class advantage, but it is less powerful in deconstructing those various forms of capital which constitute advantage.

Nevertheless, Reay's account of parental interventions with their children's university decisions (2005) draws attention to the analytical limitations of working with 'capital', and especially to the difficulties in disentangling the distinct forms of capital. Although of course the parents' narratives offer examples of how the middle-class enjoy capital advantage, and the way in which combinations of capital accumulate, their specificity is absent. The capitals are usually presented in composite form, and there is a limited consideration of their separate and distinctive dimensions. The implication from Reay's interpretation, although it is not explored in sufficient depth, is that the established middle-class parents hold higher accumulations of cultural, economic and social capital, and importantly, they are disposed to use these to the benefit of their child.

By contrast, Ball devotes considerable attention to the concept of 'social capital', and in particular, how the Bourdieuan definition can be put to use empirically. Although he acknowledges the slippery nature of the concept, and indeed that 'conceptually and empirically it is sometimes difficult to maintain a clear distinction....', the combination of social capital alongside cultural capital is shown to be a powerful resource (2003: 82). He encourages us to consider the potential of social capital as a means to conceptualise advantage beyond the ubiquitous use of cultural capital. With cultural capital omnipresent in educational research, and with its diversity of meanings, social capital offers a further way to deconstruct vague notions of 'advantage'. Ball draws attention to the way in which social capital is activated through parental networks and group memberships which provide their children with

'relevant and valued resources'. The emphasis on 'relevant and valued' reminds us that Bourdieu's notion of capital must always be read in relation to field. The point is not that working-class parents lack networks or don't belong to groups, but instead that middle-class parents are able to draw on the appropriate sources of knowledge to help their children in the field of education.

That the value of capital is specific and contingent on field, rather than a generalised accumulation and use of advantage, is highlighted through Fiona Devine's account of middle-class practices (2004). In contrast to the somewhat broadly-defined accounts of middle-class practices offered by Reay and Ball, Devine uses Bourdieu's concept of capital to tease out a more subtle analysis. Her account of parents' decision-making draws attention to the mobilisation of multiple capital compositions held by two sections within the middle-class. In contrast to Reay and Ball's general and wide-ranging account of middle-class advantage, Devine's case study of teachers and doctors enables her to trace the practices of two quite different fractions. Although of course these two occupational groups cannot be seen to represent the full range of middle-class occupations, her study does offer insights into the diversity of practices within the middle-class.

Devine investigates how middle-class parents achieve advantage for their children through their use of economic, social and cultural capital. She thus attempts to analytically separate the different types of capital and to explore how they are put into practice. Devine articulates a concern that she had 'operationalized Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital in an unimaginative and mechanical way' (2004:210). I understand Devine's concern to be that she has reduced cultural capital to a resource rather than developed it as an integral part of Bourdieu's overall framework. With a more narrow interpretation of cultural capital, Devine is able to strip away the emotions introduced by Reay, and

instead we are provided with more detail as to the nature of the cultural capital used by parents.

Certainly, the overall impression gained from Devine's account is one of rational and reasonable practices. There is little evidence of the emotions that permeate the stories provided by Reay. Moreover, Devine's narratives are interpreted in a more dispassionate way, with her study treating the use of capital as part and parcel of normal, reasonable middle-class practices. Devine's operationalization of cultural capital, in particular, with its concentration on family routines, for example on television consumption and reading, has the effect of normalising and perhaps legitimating the middle-class behaviour she describes. Whilst providing a compelling case for the reproduction of middle-class advantage through the site of the middle-class home, her presentation of the practices adopted by parents are couched in the vocabulary of good parenting rather than through the more judgemental lens adopted by Reay and Ball.

Given that Devine's emphasis is on the various forms of capital used by parents, she devotes little attention to habitus. As such, her participants become symbols of capital. Indeed, it is not easy to picture the participants in her study and we know little about their emotional response to the field. By contrast, the portrayal of parents by Reay and Ball is of real-life characters whose decisions are characterised sometimes by anxiety, but always as effortful and assertive. With greater attention to habitus, their emphasis is on the behaviours and dispositions associated with middle-class parents' sense of entitlement. Cultural capital is reduced to little more than a metaphor of the middle-class relationship to the field of education. Rather than an exploration of discernible forms of capital, these are vividly drawn embodiments of the 'pushy parent'.

In positioning habitus alongside cultural capital, Reay and Ball produce an account of classed practices which is rich and evocative. Their accounts emphasise an otherwise concealed dimension of decision-making and there is much to be gained from the greater emphasis on the habitus. Nevertheless, there is a danger of becoming entangled with ethics and principles of parenting, and I discuss this further below. Moreover, and as I discuss in the next chapter, Bourdieu's concepts must be understood as part of his overriding philosophy. To introduce strategy and intention to actions which are governed by the 'logic of practice' is to misappropriate Bourdieu. What at the time of their occurrence are normal and natural practices cannot be attributed with strategic intent after the event.

So, in many ways, the approaches of Reay, Ball and Devine offer only a partial interpretation of Bourdieu. As I will explore in a little more detail below, all three use his language as a means to explain classed practices, and in doing so, successfully draw attention to the difficulties encountered when using his tools empirically. Above all, we are reminded of the limitations associated with the translation of his concepts into practical tools. For example, the concept of cultural capital, which is arguably the most celebrated of his concepts, has become so amorphous as to render it almost meaningless. Consequently, in its omnipresence and multiplicity of meanings, cultural capital presents difficulties in its effective and coherent use within a Bourdieuan framework. With an overabundance of interpretations, to put it into practice becomes far from straightforward, and its potential as providing a more tangible concept than habitus is unrealised.

Thus, despite adopting Bourdieu's vocabulary, the research is limited through what is arguably a 'pick and mix' approach to his conceptual tool-kit. To seize upon key concepts as stand-alone rather than as part of an overall framework is to misinterpret their place in relationship to

each other. Moreover, it is to overlook their value in contributing to his fundamental objective to offer an account of practice.

### **Strategic parenting as mediated through habitus?**

Although Reay, Ball and Devine all cite the influence of Bourdieu and work within his general lexicon, there is only a limited interpretation of the parents' narratives as articulating natural, taken-for-granted responses defined by the habitus. The emphasis is very strongly on parents as active and involved throughout their children's educational journeys, and as such there is a question as to how far the notion of habitus is able to explain the parents' decision-making. Devine's account of parents' desire for their children to 'get on', and in their making decisions to move to 'good areas' or 'dip in and out of the private sector', are not articulated through the indeterminate, vague workings of the habitus, but in careful and planned use of economic, cultural and social resources.

Similarly for Reay, the parents' interventions were not consistent with Bourdieu's notion of the 'pre-reflexive, unconscious habitus....but through calculation and foresight, a much more strategic deliberation....'(2005: 73). Furthermore, despite the certainty and entitlement which according to Reay characterises established middle-class practices, even these narratives are frequently interpreted as deliberate, calculating and planned. For Reay, the claimed effortlessness, the virtuoso performances of her established middle-class parents are nonetheless read as strategic and interventionalist. The parents, and more frequently mothers are ever-vigilant, engaging in 'repair work' and drawing on 'extensive academic social capital' to manage their children's educational trajectories. The mothers are attributed with setting in place strategic and deliberate actions to



maintain 'the distances that need to be kept' (Bourdieu 1984: 472). Parental interventions as represented through Reay's notion of 'emotional capital' become gendered class weapons with which to engineer class boundary maintenance.

It is therefore difficult to reconcile Reay's use of the term 'familial habitus' with her general account of middle-class practices. In spite of Reay's coining the term 'familial habitus', her analysis and interpretation say little about the parents' 'ordinary relationship to the world' (Bourdieu: 1990b: 78). Whilst Reay argues that habitus enables her to foreground 'the power of implicit and tacit expectations, affective responses...' (Reay et al: 2005:27), her accounts of 'simply what people like us do' or the 'normal biography' of the established middle-class parents is submerged in a narrative permeated by deliberate calculations, close involvement and careful steering.

The contradiction between Reay's use of the 'familial habitus' is especially problematic when considering her account of established middle-class parents. Their familial habitus is characterised by certainty and a sense of entitlement, which she contrasts with the novice middle-class who have 'had to intensify the time, effort and money they invest in education' (ibid 71). However, the 'established middle-class', whose habitus and field provide a near perfect match, and who are according to Reay 'fish in water', are difficult to identify as such in her dominant narrative (ibid). These parents are in Bourdieuan terms 'virtuosos' of the game (Bourdieu: 1990b), and whose educational practices should be characterised by ease and assurance. However, the expected ease and effortlessness is at odds with Reay's dominant narrative. She displays an overriding concern to depict parents' practices as strategic and effortful. Therefore it seems to me that Reay puts forward an inconsistent and shifting account of middle-class practices. The main narrative thread is one which at times gives

emphasis to '*the* middle-class' characterised by effort and calculation, and yet at others, an assertion of the established middle-class parents' ability to follow their natural and taken-for-granted dispositions. This presents a contradiction: on the one hand Reay follows Bourdieu to identify the seamless fit between the established middle-class and the field of education, yet on the other hand she presents a central narrative of a uniformly strategic and effortful middle-class.

This emphasis on strategic, calculative educational practices is difficult to reconcile with the claimed Bourdieuan underpinning to 'class practices' research. There is a very real danger of assigning considerable agency and deliberation to the behaviour of middle-class parents whilst at the same time making those claims using the language of habitus. Strategic intention is injected into parents' behaviour, which through a Bourdieuan lens would follow a 'practical logic' as individuals simply act on their 'natural' inclinations. As I discuss in the previous chapter, the scope for strategic calculation as part and parcel of Bourdieu's concept of habitus is widely debated. Moreover, the moments when rational, strategic action comes into play are when habitus and field are disrupted, in what Bourdieu describes as 'times of crisis' when individuals' ordinary and everyday intuitive responses are challenged. However, to routinely introduce strategy into parents' accounts of practices is to separate action from its time and context. What is more, to inject strategic intention in parents' narratives of choice risks introducing the shadowy dimension of researcher values and principles.

Indeed, embedded within the dominant agenda developed by Ball and Reay are two strands which take us to the heart of the problem facing classed practices research. These are issues of 'emancipation' and 'exploitation' which are central to 'class analysis' as traditionally conceived. Let me point to two statements which are illustrative. Firstly,

the following statement from Reay: "...whilst the increasing complexities of class positionings signal the need for more sophisticated, nuanced analyses they do little to alleviate continuing class inequities' (Reay et al 2001: 857). This makes clear the intentions and motivations behind her research project; for Reay the focus is on revealing and accentuating coarse distinctions to disrupt normative assumptions and challenge policy. Intra-class nuances are unhelpfully imprecise and would serve to obfuscate the most significant inequalities.

Secondly, the new agenda asks us to consider whether middle-class parents' mobilisation of capital constitute exploitation. Although Ball accepts the difficulty of representing educational practices as 'forms of direct exploitation or oppression', he argues they are 'caught up within the reproduction of more general relations of exploitation' (2003:11). The use of fee-paying schools is marked out as the ultimate example where 'advantage is deliberately privileged over adequacy', and with this construction Ball attempts to draw lines of acceptable and non-acceptable practices (Ball 2003). The tension between 'adequacy and advantage' is central to a clear and distinctive ethical dimension to the research. Furthermore, whilst this is most starkly articulated through the use of private schools, it is not limited to that particular form of parental intervention. Indeed, some degree of moralistic judgement can be discerned in the more vaguely articulated, generalised forms of interventions and support.

For example, in Crozier et al's study of middle-class parents' educational strategies, the discussion focuses on the 'attempt to reconcile their ideological positions on state education, with their parental commitment to ensuring high achievement and happiness for their children' (2008). This study explores the various ways in which parents articulate the decision to send their children to the local state school, regardless of its perceived performance. The participants are

middle-class parents whose practices are at first sight contrary to the stereotypical 'pushy parent'. However, the study explores the different ways in which parents 'draw the line', between their children and others. They are said to 'eschew a conventional 'working the system to their advantage', but nevertheless 'manage their anxieties by employing their educational knowledge and various capitals to ensure success....and if worse comes to worse....bail out' (ibid: 270).

Thus, even though these parents send their children to local schools, which may be relatively poor compared with choices further away, Crozier et al point to their claims to be 'acting against self interest' as enabling their children to monopolise the schools' resources and schemes such as the 'Gifted and Talented' programmes (ibid). Thus even when parents' narratives articulate democratic principles and values, these are interpreted as constituting selfish and self-interested behaviour. Once again, this raises a question about the relationship between classed practices and class analysis as traditionally conceived. It asks us to consider whether such middle-class practices amount to 'exploitation', with its implications that advantage for middle-class children results in disadvantage for working-class children.

These issues will be considered further in this chapter's conclusion as I set out the questions for my own research. Before that, let me first discuss what the literature on classed practices offers to our understanding of student decision-making.

## **Student decision-making**

There is a noticeable absence of middle-class young people in the university decision-making literature. Their voices are rarely heard and where attention is focused on middle-class decision-making, this is most

often articulated through parents' narratives. There is an implication perhaps that middle-class young people are mere symbols of their parents' success. Their university destinations offer evidence of their parents' effective colonisation of the educational field, with their presence in the literature simply required to confirm long-standing inequalities. Consequently, although the literature is concerned with the nature of young people's university decision-making, their choice of a particular university or indeed whether to participate at all, this work has focused on the difficulties encountered by those classified as outsiders or newcomers to the higher education system through their class, ethnicity or age (Archer et al 2003; Ball et al 2001; Ball, Reay and David 2002; Ball et al 2002b).

When the lens is directed on social class, the literature has a particular focus on the faltering and hesitant nature of working-class students' progression from school or college to university. Their higher education participation is represented through narratives of personal transformation and renegotiation of self. The middle-class students are offered as a contrast rather than as individuals in their own right. Above all, the middle-class young people's journeys to university are said to be relatively seamless and straightforward trajectories. University is an expectation and an extension rather than a new beginning. The higher education field, and in particular, its prestigious institutions, has been represented as the province, perhaps the natural territory of the middle-class student.

The emphasis on working-class choice is in keeping with the policy agenda accenting widening participation, and with greater numbers of 'non-traditional' entrants to the university sector, the research focus has, understandably, been to explore working-class students' as first generation entrants to higher education (e.g. Thomas and Quinn 2007). The choices of these 'non-traditional' students have been discussed in

relation to a mix of emotional, financial and practical factors which are seen to limit their choice, and like the literature on parents' classed practices, the studies have drawn heavily from a Bourdieuan conceptual framework.

In stark contrast to middle-class university participation, working class students are characterised as operating within constraints which render choice a meaningless concept. Ball et al propose that 'choice of university is a choice of lifestyle and a matter of 'taste', (2002) and with choices that are said to reflect 'the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the taste of necessity' (Bourdieu 1984: 177-8). The decision to go to university is for the middle-class students about which university to choose, with different universities representing real and meaningful choices across a wide geography. For these students, who are termed by Ball et al as 'cosmopolitan choosers', a 'taste for luxury' captures their ability to make choices within wide geographical boundaries which enable students to consider the status and kind of universities. In opposition, the 'local choosers' are in Bourdieuan terms operating through a 'taste of necessity', and for these students what is defined as a 'choice' is a severely limited range of options and sometimes a single, local university.

The binary model of student decision-making provides a powerful conceptualisation of university choice as a classed process, which plays itself out through both the cultural, emotional and economic dimensions of class. Nevertheless, the literature's treatment of student choice offers some unhelpful similarities with that on parents' educational practices, and its tendency to argue for clear-cut differences at the neglect of finer nuances is mirrored. As 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). Students' educational decision-making is set in terms of a

confident and knowledgeable middle-class positioned against a peripheral working-class.

Brooks offers a more complex picture of student decision-making amongst a group of lower-middle-class students (2005). For Brooks, the assumptions of middle-class confidence found in the broader literature were not consistent with some of her own research sample, which she found was 'more similar to that routinely portrayed as working-class' (ibid 172). Brooks concluded that occupational classifications were too crude in themselves to account for the young people's university decisions. Her research provides a challenge to the dominant binary model of student choice, and moreover, it calls for deconstruction of the occupational class labels which fail to capture the myriad of influences and subtleties that shape responses to higher education.

If the model proposed by Reay and Ball offers overly-blunt contrasts, it nevertheless has established itself as a powerful and convincing explanation of choice beyond that determined by class location itself. Rather than choice as simply determined by structural location, the model gives particular emphasis to the role of habitus. Thus, with its accent on the mediating function of habitus, the model provides a powerful rebuttal to theories of rational choice and most notably the approach advocated by Goldthorpe (1996; 1998; 2006). Emotions and feelings are at the centre of the students' narratives, with Ball and Reay arguing that young people engage in 'class-matching' or 'class in the head', as they develop a sense of places for people like themselves and places for others (Ball et al 2002b). Unlike the emphasis on strategic parenting, the young people's decision-making resonates more closely with Bourdieu's concept of habitus-generated responses to the field, with elite universities evoking feelings of discomfort and otherness for working-class students.

The conceptual emphasis on habitus thus allows students' decision-making to encapsulate the affective responses to the field of higher education. Consequently the propensity for middle-class students to attend more prestigious universities and working-class students to attend new universities asks us to consider how those feelings of being at home or an outsider are developed. The imagery and representation of higher education institutions is discussed by Baker and Brown, whose study of predominantly working-class, non-traditional students found little evidence of a sense of hostility or separation from elite institutions (2007). Instead, they argued that the 'contingent repertoire of choosing an institution, is not inevitably debilitating or demotivating for non-traditional students' (ibid). Unlike what is proposed through the binary choice model, Baker and Brown found that their participants had 'actively emphasised' the desire to go to 'the best' universities as constructed through imagination of what a proper university should look like, and with students associating traditional, prestigious institutions with romantic and exotic qualities (ibid). Whilst pointing to the difference between their students and the so-called 'contingent' choosers identified by Reay et al, the narratives of wanting 'the best', and the concept of a 'proper' university nevertheless position these 'high achieving women' as outsiders looking in from afar. Their determination to attend prestigious universities is characterised by effort and uncertainty; their stories contrast to the 'paradox of natural distinction' or 'feel for the game' that is proposed as defining the habitus of privilege (Bourdieu 1990a: 108; Bourdieu 1998: 25).

The binary model of student decision-making encapsulates not only subjective aspects of decision-making, but its harder edges too. The different ways in which students decipher the field of higher education, how they develop understandings of its hierarchies and admission rules is associated with their activation of capital. So-called 'hot' and 'cold'



knowledge derives from students' access to cultural, economic and social capital. Reay et al (2005) found that it was 'primarily at the two ends of the social spectrum of our sample that grapevine knowledge was seen as more salient than official information' (ibid: 152).

However, in their discussion of 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge there is a tendency to conflate the young people's social class with their school type. For example, 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 (2005). The access to 'hot' knowledge was, for private students, of 'a totally different order to that of the far less well connected students...' (ibid: 152). The private school is represented as a site of privilege, and furthermore, as homogenously middle-class. There is no space for the contradiction and complexity which is found in Proweller's ethnography of 'Best Academy', a girls' private school in the United States (1998). For Proweller, the girls' 'narratives fundamentally challenge any suggestion of the linear reproduction of class identities...' (ibid: 93). More generally though, the private school is offered as a uniform and one-dimensional context in which middle-class students are cosseted and coached towards elite universities.

By contrast, working-class and state school students are presented by Reay as if indistinguishable and are said to devote limited attention to league tables and guides, for example, and their informal sources of advice are characterised as arbitrary and haphazard. They do not have access to the multiple sources of capital enjoyed by the middle-class, privately educated students and are consequently outsiders whose choices are based on limited information, and moreover characterised by an unsophisticated approach to interpreting that information.

Drawing binaries of social class and school institution, the dominant framework offers broad brush strokes rather than fine detail. Its arguments are powerful reminders of classed-based inequalities which continue to slip through the cracks of formal equality policies. The construction of a model of choice as mediated by habitus and capital presents a multi-dimensional perspective. This is a framework which extends our understanding of class as it is articulated through students' educational decisions. Thus we have moved a considerable way from class outcomes as determined by class location.

Thus, in many ways the model developed by Ball and Reay has established a key paradigm of student decision-making. Arguably they have so effectively and decisively shaped the field that further research takes their contribution as a necessary and useful foundation. Nevertheless, as I will now discuss, the model of educational classed practices writes out the uncertainty, which is part and parcel of middle-class reproduction.

### **Educational classed practices research: 'from the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies' (Bourdieu 1977: 3)**

Bourdieu reminds us of the uncertainty which lies at the heart of practice:

The shift from the highest probability to absolute certainty is a qualitative leap out of proportion to the numerical difference (in Schrift 1997: 191).

To neglect that uncertainty, and especially, to write out the time interval between action and outcome, is to fail to capture practice. It is the desire to provide an account of practice which drives this thesis. Let

me now draw together the questions which will be developed through my own research study. Specifically, my research addresses the following principal objective:

Through the particular example of educational decision-making, to explore the problems and gaps in the way that Bourdieu has been used so far to understand classed practices.

In doing so, I aim to:

- i) deconstruct the overly-homogeneous representation of the middle-class through educational classed practices literature;
- ii) dissect vague and sociologically unhelpful concepts of confidence and privilege as characteristic of middle-class university decision-making;
- iii) challenge the assumed correspondence between middle-class students and the fee-paying sector;
- iv) give more attention to the institution, and its place in the field;

and,

- v) with the particular example of parents' decision to use private education, to explore whether classed practices can be described through a vocabulary of exploitation and conflict.

These questions use the vehicle of educational decision-making as a means to critically engage with classed practices research. It is the contention of this thesis that there has been insufficient attention to the 'theory of practice and of the practical mode of knowledge' which underpins Bourdieu's endeavour (Bourdieu 1977: 4). Against claims to explore class analysis through the everyday practices and processes, there is, in educational classed practices research, a tendency to underplay the very practical logic, which for Bourdieu, generates those practices. Thus, in addressing the treatment of middle-class educational practices, the thesis offers a contribution to the particular sub-field of educational classed practices. At the same time, through taking up the issues raised by Bottero (2004; 2005) it engages with the classed practices agenda more broadly, in particular its reconciliation with class analysis more traditionally conceived.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter explores the methodological challenges I have encountered and addressed during the process of planning, undertaking and writing up my research. Having explored how the Bourdieuan concepts of habitus, capital and field had stimulated the development of the classed practices agenda, I concluded that a number of issues remain problematical in the way he has been appropriated. In using a Bourdieuan framework in which to deconstruct the middle classes, I hope to move beyond unhelpful class labels which continue to be used in classed practices research. The aim of this chapter is to provide an account of the way in which these theoretical concerns will be addressed methodologically.

The first part of this chapter engages with the philosophical foundations on which my research is based, and in doing so, discusses what claims can be made by a longitudinal, qualitative research project. In the second part of the chapter I discuss how the qualitative approach has been guided by a Bourdieuan perspective. I consider the strengths and limitations of Bourdieu's conceptual framework as tools for empirical research, and how the difficulties of putting the Bourdieuan model into practice might be overcome. I address the problem of moving 'habitus' from a compelling idea on paper into something tangible and empirically useful. Moreover, I take issue with Reay's coining of the term 'institutional habitus' which has become popular currency. In addition, the difficulties in distinguishing between the forms of capital are explored. As discussed in the previous chapter, the lack of definition, inconsistency and blurring of capitals presents serious

obstacles for researchers. Therefore this chapter grapples with how these concepts might be put to practical use in my own research.

With these foundations in place, I then describe the research setting and its participants. I explore the practical and ethical issues that have been negotiated during the research process. In doing so, I reflect on the decisions taken, and the balance of pragmatism and idealism that researchers seek to achieve. In making explicit the obstacles and compromises reached, I strive to retain the reality of what is a dynamic and ultimately negotiated practice. Hence, my conclusions are not intended to represent a 'neat and tidy' account, and I do not propose to obscure these tensions.

## **Qualitative research**

That a qualitative approach offers richer data than quantitative methods is a somewhat axiomatic statement. What is less clear though is how that data should be interpreted and the nature of the claims made. A common feature of a qualitative approach is the belief that individuals' understanding and interpretation of their lives provides a meaningful and multi-layered explanation of the research question. This is consistent with an epistemological position which sees knowledge to be gained from talking to people, hearing their stories and observing their world. Thus, with a concern to develop an understanding of the middle-class through their educational practices, my research questions require a qualitative approach which allows me to access their usually private, and often previously unarticulated thoughts.

After having decided to work within a qualitative framework, I initially immersed myself within the vast literature of methodology that is labelled as qualitative. Only a cursory review of research methodologies

would define qualitative research in contrast to a quantitative approach. The body of qualitative methodological literature reveals fundamental philosophical divisions within it. According to Gubrium and Holstein, 'qualitative research is a diverse enterprise...counterposed with the monolith of quantitative sociology...' (1997:5). In similar vein, Mason observes, 'qualitative research – whatever it might be – certainly does not represent a unified set of techniques or philosophies, and has indeed grown out of a wide range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions' (1996: 3).

It is impossible to discuss how methodological decisions were reached without bringing to the fore the theoretical and philosophical foundations of this research. This is evidenced most clearly in the claims and limitations of qualitative interviewing. I had initially taken for granted that qualitative interviews would form a pivotal part in my research design, yet in considering the validity of interview data, I had to first engage in debates about limitations and challenges associated with the interview. Such methodological decisions are therefore inextricably bound up with the powerful theoretical influences of postmodernism and feminism, both of which challenge the claims made by scientific, positivist epistemology. Without wishing to attach either a feminist or postmodernist label to my own research, I took seriously the concerns raised by both, and therefore the methodological decisions and the way in which I planned my fieldwork were guided by their critique of scientific epistemologies.

## **Narrative interviews**

As the purpose of my research was to understand individuals' lived experiences, I wanted to minimise my own role in the process, and as far as possible, enable the individuals to speak for themselves.

According to Mishler (1986), interviews have the potential to become joint constructions of meaning, with the ever-present power dynamics of interviewer and interviewee able to shape responses.

However, the treatment of interview responses as stories 'moves the discussion of interviewing beyond the boundaries set by the traditional approach, as we consider how interviewees 'connect their responses into a sustained account' (ibid).

And, as Coffey and Atkinson note:

...the storied qualities of qualitative textual data, both 'naturally' given or research driven, enable the analyst to consider both how social actors order and tell their experiences, and why they remember and retell what they do (1996: 57).

The collection of narratives was thus consistent with my objective to gain access to the participants' world. I wanted to hear their accounts unfold in the way that was meaningful to them. Moreover, I concluded that the collection of narratives provided a means of reducing my own influence. Mindful of the potential for the interview dynamic to manipulate and steer the participant responses, I saw narratives as a way to overcome those possibilities.

With my research question necessitating an in-depth exploration of how individuals articulate their practices, I knew that I risked dredging up awkward and uncomfortable memories. However, I saw in the collection of narratives a means to discuss difficult or sensitive subjects in a familiar and non-threatening format. Moreover, through the medium of a story, participants are given the freedom to negotiate the way their accounts are presented, their beginning and ending. Thus, there was no claim to provide an objective account, rather to hear the perspective of the participant.



Nevertheless, I remained troubled by the extent to which interviews could ultimately be seen as a vehicle for a researcher's own imagination or sub-conscious intentions. Above all, I was concerned to avoid introducing the vocabulary of 'class' into my interviews. If class was to be defined through practices, then I did not require participants to address traditional 'class' questions which probed class identities or class consciousness. I was driven too by an overriding methodological aim to be consistent with a Bourdieuan perspective. For Bourdieu, the research process is inherently intrusive and each exchange risks becoming caught up in the power relationship between researcher and participant (1999: 608). He argues for 'active and methodical listening.....adopting the interviewee's language, views, feelings and thoughts...' (ibid). He urges the researcher to take account of the potential to inflict symbolic violence through the process of research, 'in the invisible determinations inherent in the intellectual posture itself, in the scholarly gaze that he or she casts upon the social world' (Bourdieu 1992: 69). Whilst the interview is an inherently problematic research tool, there are ways to 'reduce as much as possible the symbolic violence exerted through that relationship' (Bourdieu 1999: 609). Therefore, whilst adopting a biographical narrative approach I acknowledge that these go *some* way to overcome the flaws and pitfalls associated with interviews. My aim was to minimise the potential for intrusive questioning and imposition of language. Before describing the biographic narrative technique, let me first discuss the ontological status I gave to such interviews.

In Yanos and Hopper's engagement with Bourdieu's methodological concerns, they have argued that the interview process generates responses which are 'too neat' and 'canned' (2008). What Yanos and Hopper describe as 'lack of authenticity' and a 'highly artificial exchange' raises some interesting questions about the nature, purpose

and claims made when collecting *narrative* data. Whilst not claiming to be naturally occurring, the narrative interview goes some way to simulating the kind of interaction that takes place when an individual has a story to tell an interested listener. It would be naïve not to imagine that such a story may be embellished and edited too. The account told to a friend is not necessarily 'authentic' if that means 'genuine' and 'accurate'. Each conversation, whether with a friend or a researcher, must be considered as a performance of kinds. Beyond the exchange of information, the conversation involves the history of that relationship, its present status, and possible future. Therefore all conversations have to be understood within a particular context which makes 'authenticity' neither realistic or necessarily desired. Our evaluation of past decisions and our explanation for those decisions is rarely fixed or forever perfectly and accurately frozen in the memory. The stories we tell our friends, and indeed the stories we recreate for ourselves, are multiple versions and nuanced accounts.

Therefore, to make claims for the 'real' truth is misguided. I am not suggesting that the narrative is merely a performance with no validity outside of that arena. Instead, I am arguing that the narrative interview comes close to 'real-life' conversation, and rather than an artificial exchange, becomes a process of active listening. Nevertheless, my role as researcher could not be rendered invisible or impartial. Rather, I accepted that I was a part of the process, and its outcomes. I did believe that there was knowledge to be gathered from the interview process, however artificial the exchange, and that knowledge had validity outside of that particular encounter. So, unlike the typically postmodern assertion that realities are multiple, all knowledge contingent, and with all claims equally valid, I did not discard completely the modernist objective of uncovering a truth beyond the individual understanding of each encounter.

Consequently my aim was to find a technique which would simulate as closely as possible a naturally occurring conversation, and moreover, would avoid the imposition of my own language and classifications. With the biographical narrative interview method designed by Tom Wengraf, I found a way to address these concerns. As Wengraf states, his interview design is 'characterised by a more minimalist interviewer intervention...', and one which represents 'an extreme end of the research interview intervention spectrum....' (2006: 112). One of the fundamental principles of Wengraf's method was the non-interference with the natural story-telling process. Unlike research interviews in which the researcher may unknowingly steer the interviewee towards particular lines of enquiry, Wengraf developed a method that involves asking a 'single question aimed at inducing narrative'. The initial narrative question is then followed by a secondary interview, which picks up themes that have been presented during the first interview. The underlying principle is one of allowing the interviewee's thought processes to remain uninterrupted or imposed upon by the researcher. My role as interviewer was strictly prescribed, with the requirement that themes were raised only in the order originally presented by the interviewee, and by using the same language. The prescriptive nature of the biographic narrative interview technique appealed to my anxieties about narratives' potential to become my own stories. I drew security from the necessity of following rules, and the phenomenological principles behind them.

As much as Wengraf's biographic narrative technique offered a useful framework for collecting stories, its method of analysis was rejected on practical and ethical grounds. Wengraf advocates the analysis of narrative data via panels of three or four researchers, who would be required to share their own interpretations of the raw material. The method invites a wide range of responses to the data, and it was seen as providing a way to avoid researcher-bias. However, the time and

resource implications were impractical. Moreover, I was concerned about the breaching of confidentiality implicit in such a method.

I therefore mixed Wengraf's biographic narrative method of data collection with analysis drawing on Labov and Waletzky's framework (1967). Elliott describes how Labov and Waletzky's structural model of narrative form allows narrative data to be analysed for plot, structure and selfhood (2005). Using Labov's structural units to analyse the narrative, I could break down narratives into the following components: abstract; orientation; complication; evaluation; result, and coda. Whilst not all components will always be identified, Labov and Waletzky focus attention on the narrator's evaluation of events and experiences. In this way, the narrative structure offered insight into how past decisions were remembered and explained. As such, the articulation of practices through narratives provided a means to shift the power dynamics of the narrative interview process.

Using this framework provides a way to read narratives for both content and structure, and in doing so understand how individuals make sense of their decisions. If narrative analysis could be seen as preserving the structure of the interview data, then extraction and coding of that same data enabled me to look across all the interviews for common themes. Narrative extracts were therefore worked with twice, first within their story-telling form, and subsequently coded with the assistance of NVivo. The data which emerged were rich, multi-layered accounts in which to see the emotions and experiences of class.

Having explained my broad approach, the following section discusses in some detail how Bourdieuan tools will be put into practice. I consider especially the difficulties associated with 'habitus' and the neglect of 'field'.

## Using Bourdieuan tools to deconstruct the field

Whilst the literature review concluded that Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field offered more dynamic ways of looking at social class and educational choice, their practical use was problematic, characterised by a multiplicity of theoretical and empirical interpretations. As much as Bourdieu was widely referenced in educational research, there was little consensus as to how his concepts should be put into practice. Further, it became apparent that ubiquitous citations of Bourdieu's work were as stand-alone concepts, without reference to their place within a broader analytical framework. Rather than adopting what I considered a 'pick and mix' approach to Bourdieu, I concluded that his concepts must be used holistically.

The interconnectedness is presented in *Distinction* (1984). Bourdieu represents the relationship between capital, habitus and field by using the following equation:

$$(\text{Habitus} \times \text{Capital}) + \text{Field} = \text{Practice} \quad (1984: 102)$$

If this formulation might be condemned as overly-simplified and pseudo-mathematical, obscuring the complexities behind each variable, it at least draws attention to the need to work with Bourdieu's concepts relationally. Looking at habitus, capital and field relationally provides ways to explore how they intersect and interconnect, and that the 'logic of practice' within a given field is generated by the interaction of habitus, cultural capital and field.

Especially in educational research, it is striking how in the widespread appropriation of Bourdieuan tools, habitus and capital have dominated the literature. With the emphasis on 'habitus' and 'capital', the

institution and its place in the field had been largely neglected. We know little, if anything, about the middle-class students' or parents' relationship to the educational institution. In particular, with the tendency to use the private sector as synonymous with privilege, we are presented with the middle-class as fitting comfortably and non-problematically within what is a rather vague representation of that kind of institution. Moreover, we are told little about its relation to the field. As such, we are provided with an account of practices as if taking place in a vacuum. Even where the lens is directed to the level of the institution rather than to the individual, this has tended to be explored through the concept of 'institutional habitus'. As I will argue below, rather than using the term 'institutional habitus', which is confusing and misleading, institutions are more usefully analysed through the notion of 'institutional doxa'.

As I discussed in chapter one, Bourdieu's aim with habitus is to provide a means to explain individual action as an embodied and practical response to the field in which he or she is positioned. To characterise an institution as having a certain habitus assigns it with subjectivity. Above all, the concept of habitus is one which allows Bourdieu to capture the social through its embodiment within the biological individual. Therefore with the linguistic coupling of the words 'institutional' and 'habitus', there is an insinuation that the organisation has a habitus, which of course it does not. To use it in this way, as applied to an organisation, rather than the individuals within it, misappropriates the concept's most important dimension.

That is not to say that institutions are somehow fixed entities without active individuals who help to shape and develop their position in the field. Rather than determined once and for all, the position of the organisation is always challenged and contested through the particular

dynamics of the field as it changes over time and in relation to other fields. As Bourdieu says:

A field is not simply a dead structure, a set of 'empty places', as in Althusserian Marxism, but a *space of play* which exists as such only to the extent that players enter into it who believe in and actively pursue the prizes it offers' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 19)

The field of education is a *space of play*, and its existence rests on the affinities with individuals whose habitus leads them to value and have faith in its function. However, rather than defining an institution's position through the concept of habitus, it is more appropriate to use the term 'doxa'. So instead of using the label 'institutional habitus', it is more accurate to refer to the construction of an organisational doxa, which is the inculcation of shared understandings and values. Through the degree to which there is a closeness of fit between habitus and field, institutions inculcate individuals into distinctive and institutionally-valued forms of cultural capital.

As I describe in chapter five, the institution's development of doxic understandings, or in other words, the individuals' apparently natural and taken-for-granted acceptance of its dominant capital serves to construct its position in the field. In the institution's ability to confer legitimacy to particular forms of cultural capital over others, they come to represent institutionally distinctive configurations of cultural capital. It is this characteristic cultural capital 'make-up' which leads institutions to be positioned in the field. Rather than the position of each institution reflecting its 'habitus', it is instead a reflection of that organisation's dominant cultural capital. In the case of Grayshott Grammar, this capital is derived from its students' destinations to elite universities. Moreover, and as I discuss in chapter five, the representation and

display of particular types of cultural capital enables the organisation to create doxic understandings of university choice.

My intention is therefore to position the Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College in relation to the field of higher education by adopting Bourdieu's prescription that to '...identify the forms of specific capital that operate within it, and to construct the forms of specific capital one must know the specific logic of the field' (1992: 108). The 'specific logic of the field' is discussed in the context of the expansion of higher education, government rhetoric on widening participation, and the patterns of participation. I will then show how the two institutions construct distinctive positions in relation to the field of higher education due to their very different capital accumulations. Furthermore, I will argue that the institutions' position in the field must be understood as part of their history and trajectory, with the sixth-forms occupying separate positions in the field due to past, present and anticipated future destinations of their students.

Institutions are thus positioned according to their capital composition relative to that of others in the field, and this capital composition is accomplished through the individuals who make up the organisation. However, it is here, in the multiple relationships which make up the space between individual and organisation that Bourdieu's tools of analysis appear blunt. Of course, there may be examples of individual resistance and refusal of the organisational doxa, but it is difficult to see the individual habitus, except in times of change as individuals move in or out of the organisation. As such, there is space for resistance as individuals come into contact with an organisation whose capital composition is in conflict with his or her habitus, and it is here that we gain a glimpse of habitus.



Whilst the individual habitus is developed through exposure to, and experience gained from an institution, the organisation is not reducible to those individuals and vice versa. The methodological challenges associated with 'habitus' are bound up with its conceptual strength; it is 'good to think with' (Jenkins 1992), and quoting Hey, (2003), Reay noted there was a 'tendency for habitus to be sprayed throughout academic texts like 'intellectual hairspray' (2004). But to reveal the habitus through the seemingly 'natural' responses of individuals' who are 'like fish in water' is problematic due to its taken-for-granted and below-conscious nature. If habitus is, in Roy Nash's words 'worth the candle' (1999) then it is as a means to discuss habitus and field as they collide; to glimpse the habitus as it comes into contact with a new part of the field. As I discuss in chapter six, narratives of transition reveal the habitus of three students as they become a part of Grayshott Grammar. Their narratives of change provide a glimpse of habitus. However, habitus is a flimsy and often elusive concept to pin down. Moreover, when the relationship between habitus and field is closely matched, the behaviour and dispositions are so natural, so unthinking as to be beyond the grasp of empirical research.

Whilst chapter one discussed how for Reay, habitus encompassed varying degrees of reflexivity, my own reading of habitus was one that emphasised its agents' obliviousness, and lack of reflection or questioning in their day-to-day decision making. There was little room for rational, articulation or reflection and consequently, the challenges of 'measuring' habitus as something that existed below the surface were not insignificant and it therefore presented very real methodological difficulties.

Thus, if one difficulty in grappling with habitus was its operating below the consciousness, another was its fuzzyness, and as Reay notes:

There is an indeterminacy about the concept that fits in well with the complex messiness of the real world. But there is also a danger in habitus becoming whatever the data reveal (2004: 438)

In recognising the vague, elusive nature of habitus, I decided to anchor it to the more clearly-defined concept of cultural capital. I interpreted habitus as the embodiment of cultural capital, and as such individual's varying capacities to make educational choices. As I had noted in the previous chapter, Devine (2004) had characterized cultural capital in quite narrow measures, while Reay (1998a; 1998b; 2004; 2005) had adopted a broader definition, drawing on emotional dimensions more usually associated with habitus. In researching parental involvement in primary schools (Ed. Grenfell and James 1998), Reay had incorporated the following aspects into her very broad definition of cultural capital: 'material resources; educational qualifications; available time; information about the education system; social confidence; educational knowledge; and the extent to which entitlement, assertiveness, aggression or timidity characterized mothers' approaches to teaching staff' (ibid 59). For Reay then, cultural capital was understood as more than the possession of knowledge or qualifications, but a sense of entitlement as women presented different capacities for expressing their concerns or needs about their children's education.

Whilst also hoping to capture the affective and emotional dimensions of educational decision-making in my own research, I considered that Reay's reference to qualities such as assertiveness and timidity was problematic. These behaviours, whilst informed by cultural capital, must be seen as contingent, relational concepts. Moreover, these are not fixed, but are dispositions reflecting the habitus as it comes into play within certain fields: 'It is only in the relation to certain structures

that habitus produces given discourses or practices' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 135).

I argue therefore that capital cannot be treated as separately-defined, rather it must be analysed alongside field. Capital accumulation is symbolic and relational, rather than a fixed state of being. I therefore understand the affective elements of cultural capital to come into being at different times and places. As such, rather than defining qualities of entitlement as simply ingredients or components of cultural capital, they are more effectively presented as evidence of the habitus as it 'comes fleetingly into view'. (Jenkins 1992). Students' own sense of 'entitlement' within the educational setting was, for me, an example of capital entering that particular field, and in doing so, revealing the individual habitus against the markers of that dominant culture.

I defined habitus as being formed of the following components:

Confidence and knowledge of the academic system, its hierarchies, marks of status, processes and structures;

Ability to understand the informal, unspoken rules;

Relationships with teachers;

Imagination of the future; and

Boundary setting in university application process.

Habitus was seen, for my research, in terms of an individual's embodiment of cultural capital and its deployment within the educational field. My focus was therefore on the intersection between

individual subjectivity as it incorporates the structurally-defined field. As Grenfell and James observe:

...if individual aspects of habitus lay in individual consciousness and unconsciousness, the constituent effect of these in and through human practice is actualised in an objectively defined field. If habitus brings into focus the subjective end of the equation, field focuses on the objective (1998:15).

I saw the potential for habitus to be revealed through the narratives of three newcomers to Grayshott Grammar. Therefore, following their initial narrative interviews, subsequent meetings were designed to elicit these students' understanding of their school, its organisational structure and practices. I saw habitus too as revealed by students' dispositions towards their teachers, and their interpretation of formal and informal rules. For the wider student group, I saw the possibility of habitus being made visible through individual outlooks and imagined futures. In exploring habitus as it informs university decision-making, I saw that boundaries were drawn and options narrowed as the incorporation of structures into individual subjectivities.

One of the benefits of a longitudinal study was the ability to develop and refine the conceptual tools in response to the emerging data. After initial meetings, it had become apparent that some students were articulating perceptions of themselves as likely or unlikely to apply to an elite university based on descriptions of their academic selves as either 'average' or 'academic'. Their articulations of decision-making were characterised by an emphasis on their position relative to others. In subsequent interviews I was therefore able to incorporate questions which probed the ideas further.

Having explored the limitations and challenges associated with putting Bourdieu's tools into practice, let me now conclude this chapter by setting out the research plan that will guide this thesis.

## **Research plan**

In the previous chapter I had argued that the classed practices literature had tended to conflate the advantages of being middle-class and attending private school. Moreover, there was an assumption that the private sector was populated by a homogenous middle-class whose educational practices were characterised by ease and entitlement. However, the private sector was largely neglected from the research, and instead presented as a background against which to show the most selfish and self-interested of all middle-class practices. My intention was therefore to have the main focus of my research within the private sector as a means to provide a closer perspective. The research setting was a fee-paying sixth-form to which I gave the pseudonym 'Grayshott Grammar'.

## **Grayshott Grammar**

The school is located within a city in the South of England. One of five fee-paying institutions based in that city, all of which have sixth-form provision, Grayshott Grammar's is by far the largest, with approximately 120 students in each of its two years, all of whom take A-level courses. Students are divided into two broad geographical groups. A minority live close to the school, and by which I define as in walking distance of it. However, the majority travel in by coach, car or train. They are spread across two counties and at a maximum distance of 15 miles away from Grayshott Grammar.

The fees approach £10,000 per year, which is broadly in line with the other independent schools in the city, although considerably lower fees than those of potential competitors within the region, and whose fees approach three times that amount. The institution provides a bursary scheme and a number of scholarships, and with a large contingent of military families in the area, offers reduced fees for those families.

Data on parents' occupations provided by Grayshott Grammar gives it an unsurprisingly middle-class profile. However, it is difficult to make very strong claims for the data, since it was not consistently or routinely collected. However, based on the information provided, the institution's largest constituency is private sector professionals. Nevertheless, somewhat surprisingly, there was a considerable number of public service workers, with health and education heavily represented. Furthermore, and perhaps resonating with Proweller's study (1998), there was a relatively large group of occupations which would be difficult to classify as belonging to the professional or managerial groupings within the 'middle-class'.

### **Winterbourne College**

Although not a comparative research project, one of my aims was to consider the influence of school institution on students' university decision-making. I therefore wanted to include a second institution in order to explore the extent to which Grayshott Grammar represented a distinctive site for the accumulation of capital beyond the family. The second location was a State sixth-form college, which I have given the pseudonym 'Winterbourne College'. Situated in an adjoining town, it draws students from a similar geographical area to Grayshott Grammar.

Indeed, each year approximately 10% of Grayshott Grammar's year 11 students leave it to join Winterbourne College.

One of three state sixth-form colleges in the local area, Winterbourne College offers A-level, diploma and international baccalaureate qualifications. Its students are *not* predominantly from the area immediately surrounding the college. Instead the majority travel between 1 and 10 miles to attend Winterbourne College. With a reputation locally as 'very academic', I was told that the college had worked hard to encourage the students from the adjoining housing estate to consider it in preference to a nearby FE college. Nevertheless, I was told that Winterbourne continued to be seen as 'beyond' many local students. Only 7% of its annual cohort of 600 was from the immediate vicinity.

### **Gaining access**

The negotiation of access to Grayshott Grammar was more straightforward than I had imagined, and my request was considered favourably because of some fortuitous circumstances. Research had been carried out by the University of Southampton on a previous occasion, and the headmaster had found that to be a useful process. Unlike Proweller (1998), whose process of gaining access, and negotiating the terms of research into an American independent girls' school was marked by that school's previous experience, I was fortunate. Nevertheless, I was sensitive to my responsibility for maintaining the reputation of the University, and to the potential to leave an unhelpful legacy for future researchers.

I was further helped by the timing of my request for access. The sixth-form building had been recently expanded and modernised, and the headmaster was keen for my research to capture views on the sixth-form experience. A new head of sixth-form had been appointed, and his encouragement and enthusiasm enabled me to have access to key staff, office space, staff common rooms and administrative support. Furthermore, although referred to as 'the spy', I was afforded access to a variety of formal and informal events that structured the institution's annual calendar.

I understood that gaining access is an on-going process, and fraught with tensions and potential for compromise. My initial meetings with the headmaster required the negotiation of what role he would play in the process, and what he could expect at its conclusion. His request to approve any draft was rejected with tact and trepidation! I strongly believed that my position as researcher would be compromised if he was able to comment on a draft. Whereas Proweller agreed to share her findings with the school and its participants, I was reluctant to do this. By way of compromise I agreed to provide a summary report, which I hoped that Grayshott Grammar would find interesting in assessing the success of their new sixth-form facilities.

### **Winterbourne College.**

Gaining access to the Winterbourne College was far more problematic. I was made aware that the principal had retired, and the acting principal who had no appetite to discuss my research. I was left in no doubt that the college did not want to be involved. My original enquiry was rejected, and if I could have identified an alternative sixth-form college I would have taken that option. Nevertheless, as Winterbourne College had the most academic and prestigious reputation of state-



sector colleges locally, I was keen to negotiate some kind of access. My perseverance was eventually rewarded, and I found an ally in the form of an administrative member of the college. Eventually, after contemplating interviewing students off-site, I was given permission to carry out interviews on college premises.

Just as within Grayshott Grammar I found that negotiating access is a continual process, and the very limited access offered by Winterbourne College could not be taken for granted. Each visit involved careful requesting of space, and graceful acceptance even if promises were broken. Carrying out interviews involved creative thinking and resilience within what sometimes seems like a hostile environment. Nevertheless, over time, I forged a useful relationship in the College's Careers Advisor, whose interest in my research was evident. I was eventually given access to an office and was consequently able to observe the students as they visited the department.

I have described very different levels of access offered by the two institutions. One challenge was to remain unaffected by acts of kindness or indifference. Moreover, I understood that my research activity had to inflict minimal disruption to the life and work of the institutions. Let me now discuss the participants.

## **The sample**

I make no claims that the students are representative in socio-economic terms, either of sixth-form students nationally or locally. Indeed, as they shared in common the fact they had already spent, or would spend, time in the independent school sector, the focus was on a narrow section of society. Nevertheless, the parental occupations covered a wider span than I had anticipated. I was able to include students whose

independent school fees were funded by their parents, and those who had been awarded means-tested financial support. So unlike Reay and her colleagues' acceptance that the independent sector was populated by solidly middle-class families, my participants included children whose parents were certainly not working-class, but neither were they established middle-class.

### **Summary of participants**

With the classed practices literature's main focus on the practices of middle-class parents, my research aimed to include the voices of the young people themselves. Hence, my research design accented their stories over their parents' accounts of practices. Moreover, with the usual emphasis on the outcomes of middle-class practices, I wanted instead to take account of how those outcomes were achieved. Thus, despite the claims of classed practices to explore behaviours, the literature reviewed had concentrated mainly on the ultimate middle-class success. We therefore know very little, if anything about the practices which led to those usually successful outcomes. My intention was to follow the young people as they progressed through sixth-form to university offer.

The student participants comprised 12 individuals, 6 of whom had transferred to Grayshott Grammar's sixth-form from already being within the school. Three had joined its sixth-form from state secondary schools, and three had left Grayshott Grammar to join Winterbourne College. The Grayshott students had in common that they were allocated to two tutor groups, and from a pool of 14 potential students, 9 volunteered to participate in the research project. The three students who had left Grayshott Grammar for Winterbourne College were contacted via one particular student, whose name was provided by a

member of staff at Grayshott Grammar. As a group, the students had in common that they had achieved A or A\* in the GCSE subjects which had become their A-level choices. The students' pseudonyms, together with the parents' occupations are listed below:

<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>Sixth-form</u></b>	<b><u>Parents' occupation</u></b>
Felicity	Grayshott	Mother: Secretary Father: Naval Officer
Michael	Grayshott	Mother: Teacher Father: Clergyman
James	Grayshott	Mother: Doctor Father: Consultant
Ruth	Grayshott	Mother: Student Father: Lawyer
Kate	Grayshott	Mother: Secretary Father: Engineer
Pam	Grayshott	Mother: Healthcare Advisor (single parent)
Louise	Grayshott	Father: Manager Mother: Manager
Jemima	Winterbourne	Mother and Father: Retail Managers
Stephen	Grayshott	Mother: Social Worker Father: Teacher
Sharon	Winterbourne	Mother and Father: Retail Managers
Richard	Winterbourne	Mother: Teacher Father: Manager
Tom	Grayshott	Mother: Psychologist Father: Chemical Engineer

With my aim to give a voice to the middle-class young people who are silenced in the dominant accounts of decision-making, my main focus was on the student participants. Nevertheless, I wanted also to include their parents, with a view to capturing the fullest, most rounded account of educational practices. However, one of the most disappointing and surprising realities was that few parents were keen to participate. With my access limited by the extent to which their children were enthusiastic or otherwise, or even whether my messages were conveyed, I was able to interview only three parents. Nevertheless, this hiccup offered an interesting dimension to my understanding of the students' negotiation of their parents' involvement. Furthermore, with those who did agree to be interviewed the parents of young people I had classified as 'strategic and ambitious' university choosers, their co-operation was suggestive of the young people's accounts of their parents' active and close involvement. Moreover, the time they gave me exceeded my expectations, and each interview lasted some two hours.

### **Carrying out a longitudinal study**

With the primary focus of my study the transition between school and university, a longitudinal approach enabled me to follow students through their two years of sixth-form study. In meeting students during the two years prior to making the transition from sixth-form to University, I hoped to see the decision-making in its entirety, and not obscuring the twists and turns of real life. Through regular contact with students, I hoped to learn about the lived experience of decision-making, rather than rationalised accounts of a decision already made. The educational practices were not once and for all decisions, and instead they are better understood as an on-going process. With my

criticism of the classed practices literature's focus on outcomes, I wanted to explore the behaviours and responses as they unfolded over time. To do otherwise would be to reduce classed practices to sterile associations between class location and end result.

Furthermore, like Rachel Brooks' research into friendship and university decision-making, I envisaged the longitudinal approach as enabling me to carry out an on-going analysis of the data, and providing an opportunity to revisit previous questions, fill in gaps, and explore emerging themes (Brooks 2005). Consistent with my belief that narrative interviews would allow participants to structure their accounts, I saw the potential for deviations as unproblematic. Indeed, these diversions produced material that could not have been anticipated through a structure of questions.

With my emphasis on capturing the on-going decision-making of students, my research was nonetheless bound by a structure of the UCAS application timetable, and the sixth-form calendar. In addition to carrying out regular interviews with students, I was able to spend time within each institution, attending recruitment fairs, parent evenings and other social functions. As such, I was able to observe the sixth-forms as they presented themselves to parents and potential parents.

### **Timetable**

A timetable was mapped according to the two academic years of sixth-form study, with my intention to follow students' progress through to receiving A-level results and confirmation of university places. Since I wanted to capture the practices as closely as possible to when they occurred, I considered it important to keep in regular contact with the students. Having held an initial meeting during the first term of their

lower sixth, further meetings were planned to take place at regular intervals during the course of their two academic years.

My first interview was an opportunity to ask a narrative-inducing question following Wengraf's approach. This question, 'How come you are at this sixth-form, studying these particular A-levels?' was the opening point from which to develop further questions and themes in subsequent meetings. Further interviews took place during the second academic year, and by this time, the focus had shifted towards the detail of their UCAS applications and the interviews or visits they had experienced. For the newcomers to Grayshott Grammar, I carried out additional interviews, and the schedule of questions was an extension of the themes introduced in their narratives of joining. (See appendix).

I thought it was important to pick up on issues that interested the students as they were raised. This had the effect of producing narrative data that was very variable in terms of the topics covered and length. I did not consider this to be problematic or contrary to my objective to shift the emphasis to the young people themselves. Their concerns, whether about friendships or drafting personal statements, were seen as equally valid, and indeed, insightful.

On average, each student was interviewed on five occasions over the two-year period. Visits to both institutions took place during the course of the two years, however, as already discussed, the emphasis of my research was to Grayshott Grammar and I therefore spent considerably more time in that institution.

### **Ethical considerations**

I hope that my taking seriously the responsibility towards ethical considerations has been clearly embedded in all stages of the research process. They are so deeply-interwoven in every facet of the decisions I have taken, and the decisions I have rejected. Above all, I have been sensitive to the responsibility associated with interviewing young people, caught in middle of adolescence, with all the tensions and struggles encountered.

In gaining entry into the tightly-knit world of an independent school, although clearly not researching the excluded or deprived, I was mindful that the same duty of care should be afforded. These students may in the future be described as 'elites', however, at this time of their lives, shared the insecurities and vulnerabilities with all young people. In questioning the assumed ease of transition from school to university, I needed to hear their stories and read behind the 'straightforwardness' conveyed by statistical data, with as Power et al (2003) note, looking at what individual biographies reveal that would otherwise be concealed. The biographical method encouraged individuals to reflect upon events or decisions that may otherwise be glossed over or forgotten.

In reflecting on the ethical challenges encountered during the interview process, and in particular during a longitudinal study, I rejected as illusory the notion that participation would produce jointly owned and valued results. The eliciting of narratives is made possible by developing trust, and as Finch argues, the researcher draws out deeply personal information which would be otherwise withheld from a more formal approach (1984). The informality and goodwill built up over time can serve to obscure the reality that interviews, however constructed, fulfil an ultimately one-sided objective.

Therefore with the feminists' critique of structured interviews problematising the uneven power dynamic, there is a failure to

acknowledge that the researcher remains motivated by self-interest. To deny therefore that these dimensions exist is disingenuous or naïve. The relationship between researcher and participant is inherently unbalanced, and ultimately, whatever steps are taken to minimise this, the researcher retains an element of control about how information is presented. The aim of any research process is to gather information that will be used to argue or persuade other academics or to inform policy. As such, this seemingly innocent and friendly collaboration is guided by interest and personal gain. Ultimately, in engaging in the research process we have to acknowledge the role of our own habitus, capital and position in the field of academia.

Having set out the methodological decisions and challenges confronted in carrying out this research, the next chapter provides the context in which it takes place.



## **Chapter 4: Mapping the field**

### **Introduction**

This chapter has two foci: firstly to consider representations and patterns of higher education participation, and secondly, to explore how the two sixth-form institutions are positioned in relation to the field of universities. My aim is to map out the field of higher education, and then by using both national and organisational data on students' university destinations, to position each sixth-form in relation to that field. Whereas chapters seven and eight work with the concepts of habitus and capital to explore individual and family decision-making, the focus now is on the external environment in which such choices are made. Thus, conceptually, this chapter has its emphasis on the Bourdieuan notion of field. Its contribution to the thesis is driven by the necessity to work with Bourdieu's concepts as relational and interconnected tools. Thus, before I focus on the habitus and capital accumulations of the individuals themselves, it is essential to first map out the field.

Let me now set out the chapter's structure in a little more detail. I will first sketch the contours of the field of higher education. I will then look at how the government policy of widening access and increasing participation has impacted on representations of higher education. Moreover, I will also consider how in the movement from an elite to a mass higher education system important questions are raised as to what is signified by 'going to university'. By deconstructing the field, exposing its tensions and harmonies, representations and meanings, individual decision-making processes can be seen as bound up within

their wider social and political environment. I will conclude that higher education provision remains entrenched by enduring conceptions of what is meant by a 'good' or 'proper' university, with Oxbridge continuing to dominate the field.

The chapter's second section uses data on students' university destinations to plot the co-ordinates of Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College. I mark out the position of these institutions in relation to the field of higher education, and through doing so consider how university decisions reflect not only individual and family position in relation to the field, but importantly, that of the sixth-form institution itself. Data on the type of higher education institution their students choose, the geographic spread of those destinations, and the subjects studied present very distinctive patterns of local, regional and national university participation. I discuss how the two sixth-form institutions occupy divergent positions in the field, and I explore the extent to which they coincide with the national picture of higher education participation.

Before turning to the sixth-form institutions, let me first discuss the current context in which young people are making their higher education decisions.

### **An unstable field**

A major transformation of higher education in recent years has been in terms of its expansion and its diversity. There were, as at August 2008, 109 universities and 169 higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (Universities UK). Furthermore, the vast majority of further education colleges offer degree programmes in some subjects. With the increase in breadth of subject provision and the range of institutional types with degree-awarding powers, the field of higher education has increased in size and complexity. Universities are variously described as

'old', 'new', and 'modern'. Furthermore, many universities promote themselves according to the labels from their membership of a growing number of coalitions based on their particular mission, e.g Russell and 1994 groups representing research-led institutions. However, as I argue in this chapter and through the students' and parents' narratives of decision-making in chapter seven, for some, the university sector remains characterised by an entrenched hierarchy which refuses to move beyond the stereotypes and symbolism of a particular form of university participation.

This hierarchy is created and demarcated by an array of statistics published in newspapers, web-pages and specialist guides. These tables are constructed via criteria which include measures as diverse as teaching quality, library stock and research rating. As I will discuss in chapter seven, for some of the parents and students, the tables formed a key part of their decision-making. These choosers displayed detailed and sophisticated knowledge of the league tables, their scope and inadequacies. Individual institutions were identified as 'the best place' for a particular subject and clusters of institutions were described using vocabulary such as 'good', 'proper' or 'well-respected'.

University league tables confer legitimacy to the dominance of what are often described as our 'elite' or 'ancient' establishments. This relatively small group of traditional, research-led universities is epitomised by Oxbridge, which is part of the Russell Group, itself comprised of 20 universities. The Russell Group has sought to define itself as having primacy, as 'the UK's leading research-intensive Universities.....(with) quality and strengths to compete successfully in the global market place for research, skills, expertise and training'. (What is the Russell Group? 2008)

Where the Russell Group asserts a dominant position in the field, the 1994 Group of universities is perhaps a less visible collection of research universities. The 1994 Group comprises 18 universities, including the University of York and Durham University, both of whom achieve consistently 'top ten' rankings in the numerous research league tables. The members of both the Russell Group and the 1994 group make up approximately 14% of all higher education institutions and teach just under half of the UK's students (Student acceptances in 2007: data supplied by UCAS). Looked at through Bourdieu's concept of capital, the position of relative power enjoyed by such institutions derives from capital collected over time, which as Bourdieu says, structures the field through:

the distribution of the specific capital which has been accumulated in the course of the previous struggles and which orients subsequent strategies (1984:73).

The field is enduringly structured through historically achieved positions of dominance enjoyed by a minority of universities. Institutional capital is accrued and stored through their long-held experience of the rules of the field. Moreover, the established universities' position of dominance is achieved through the continuous struggle to define the field and its legitimate capital. The field of higher education comprises deeply-embedded understandings of what is meant by a 'good' university, and these particular versions of what is 'high quality' or 'proper' are tacitly imbued with the capital valued by the established, research-led universities. Their position in the field is marked by an ability to define its stakes and interests as their own. Research projects and internationally-esteemed academics represent the sought-after currency within this field, and government funding policy has traditionally favoured research-intensive institutions, thus preserving the sector's status distinctions prior to 1992. As McNay points out, there is a

'hierarchy of privilege, with unequal funding, and with a stigma of blame attached to institutions lower in a pecking order determined by historical criteria, leading to tensions and fragmentations in the system' (2006:9).

In 2006/7, the Russell Group accounted for two thirds of the sector's total research grant income (DIUS 2008). However, the Russell Group's ability to maintain its position in the field is subject to its aims and objectives being in harmony or discord with governmental policy. Universities are not autonomous organisations and their survival lies with their ability to respond to shifts in funding policy or a reduction in overall resource allocation. For example, if there is a reconsideration of 'historical criteria' attached to funding, then this has the potential to disrupt the parameters of the field. Although dominated by the research-intensive universities, the shape of the field is in constant tension as organisational, group and sector battles are played out.

### **Government rhetoric**

As successive governments have funded the expansion of the university sector, the quality and rewards from higher education have more recently been acknowledged as providing variable returns. As previously noted, there has been a proliferation of league tables, for example, in national newspapers, on the web, and in university guides. These are dominated by the Russell Group and 1994 Groups, whose reputations have been established as research-intensive, 'old' universities. As the present Government is beginning to address issues of access into the more research-intensive universities, the future position of these universities is likely to be determined in relation to their willingness to play for stakes in a newly-defined game. The present hegemony enjoyed by such institutions is fragile and relies upon their receiving support for their research missions. Whether a balance

can be struck between meeting the aims of a widening participation agenda and at the same time promoting world-class research is unclear. Perhaps the extent to which 'elite' universities address the widening participation agenda will ultimately depend on their ability to secure economic capital beyond government funding. Therefore any attempt to position the Russell Group in the field of higher education asks us to consider their response amidst a field encountering new rules and new stakes.

Thus, the field of higher education is dynamic and vulnerable to policy change alongside transformations in the economic field. However, certain institutions are able to protect their interests and others are more exposed to the external pressures exerted through different policy regimes. One example, and which is part and parcel of the widening participation agenda, concerns the present Government's incentives or penalties linked to representation of students from 'lower social groups'. The necessity for institutions to collect and report on the socio-economic composition of its students is illustrative of the institutional dependency in relation to the field of political power.

In a recent speech to university vice-chancellors as part of consultation on a new higher education framework, Government Minister John Denham acknowledged that:

In terms of who goes to university, while the arithmetical majority of widening participation may take place in the more recent universities - as it has to date - the more research intensive universities must address fair access effectively, or their student population will remain skewed. Failing to attract the best talent from all parts of our society is bad for those institutions and bad for the students who miss out on studying there. *Secretary of State of State for Innovation, Universities & Skills, February 2009*

Such a statement can be read as recognition that university provision is qualitatively different across the higher education sector. Furthermore, that widening participation has so far been concentrated in particular kinds of universities, notably the former polytechnics and colleges. There is, in his speech, a challenge to the 'more research intensive universities' to address their currently 'skewed' student population.

The extract below illustrates how the Russell Group attempts to position itself in relation to the widening participation agenda:

Russell Group universities are committed to ensuring that the brightest candidates from all backgrounds are given the opportunity to flourish on our courses. So we have undertaken a raft of initiatives to go further in tackling the root cause of the problem of the under-representation of students from lower social groups at Russell Group institutions - the fact that they do not apply because of low aspirations, lack of advice and guidance and most importantly, under-achievement at school. These are complex problems which our universities alone cannot solve. But we are doing everything we can to help raise attainment and aspirations by working closely with local schools, colleges and community organisations, organising summer schools, providing access courses and by dramatically increasing the amount of money committed to outreach and widening participation (2008).

This statement can be read as an acknowledgement of the under-representation of 'lower social groups', but at the same time a rejection of the problem as one to be addressed by the university sector alone. The statement lays most blame with schools, and not only with poor levels of educational achievement, but the 'lack of advice and guidance'. This may be interpreted as at the level of individual teachers or, and as

I will discuss later in this chapter, at the level of the careers staff. The Russell Group's response is to propose raising achievement and aspirations rather than to compensate for their lack by adjusting entry qualifications. There is no suggestion that 'under-achievement at school' may belie the individual student's ability to 'flourish on our courses'. There is no hint that Russell Group universities might take into account the shortcomings of schools when publishing their entry grades. Instead, the message is about preserving the group's position in the field. Above all, it is a statement which reinforces the Russell Group as upholders of quality.

The statement suggests that the Russell Group's willingness to address Government widening participation targets is limited to its outreach initiatives. The fairly limited and muted response to the widening participation agenda stands in stark contrast to those institutions whose income is more reliant on securing central funding. Enthusiasm for Government initiatives correlate with the 'more recent universities' occupying positions in the field which have always been quite separate to those of the research-led universities. The field is segregated along lines of status, size and geography, with universities staking their territory in either local, regional, national or global dimensions on the one hand, and through missions of exclusivity or inclusiveness on the other.

Institutional stocks of capital enable universities to define their place in the field, and those stocks are far from secure or constant. The value of an institution's accumulation of capital should be seen in relation to its competitors'. Moreover, the worth of such capital is valued in relation to the political power which determines the field's currency. For example, for those members of the Russell and 1994 groups, success in research provides not only cultural, but symbolic and economic capital. However, as the field's structure is subject to change through the



exertion of political power, there is a tension, whether perceived or real, between academic institutions embracing a mission of inclusiveness on the one hand, and defining themselves as world-class on the other hand. As will be discussed below, this is a tension which is most visible in the relationship of traditional universities to the widening-participation agenda. This is an often uncomfortable association between Government rhetoric and stubbornly conventional attitudes of the long-established institutions.

### **The particular case of Oxbridge**

The research-based institutions occupy a particular segment of the field and the position of Oxbridge is at its extreme. Although part of the Russell Group, and yet arguably perceived as outside it, Oxbridge comprises an intriguing mix of autonomy and control. Dominating the first and second place in the United Kingdom's league tables, Oxford and Cambridge are rarely challenged in terms of their purported academic superiority over national competitors. Instead, their position is constructed on the basis of their relationship to international players.

Nevertheless, Oxbridge occupies a distinctive and highly visible position in the national field of universities. It is a position which is reflected in what might be described as idiosyncratic and eccentric rules of entry. From the early UCAS application deadline to the provision of special examinations and interviews, Oxbridge claims for itself a particular place in the field. However, just as the selection process symbolises a degree of autonomy and distinctiveness, this also helps to perpetuate the debate about Oxbridge's accessibility. Whilst the imposition of its own admissions standards and processes offers one mark of independence, the concomitant degree of scrutiny through media coverage is unparalleled. There is an almost schizophrenic veering between Oxbridge conceived as a source of national pride, and symbol

of academic excellence on the world arena, and Oxbridge as a caricatured and anachronistic reproducer of class privilege. I have positioned Oxbridge, and the other research-intensive universities in relation to fields of political power exerted through government-determined funding mechanisms and institutional performance targets. If the value of a degree is determined by its being scarce then this is a reality that jars against the promise offered by mass participation. Moreover, to suggest that existing social advantages are reproduced within an expanded higher education system is contrary to the principles and philosophy of education signifying a route to social mobility. Nevertheless, the meanings attached to 'going to university' are multiple and varied. Constructions of university participation go beyond those understandings produced by government discourse or academic research.

Thus, as well as determining the position of an institution in relation to the field of political power, we have to include more diffuse and ethereal forms of power, in the widest sense of that word. Power can be understood as derived solely from the formal panoply of rules, regulations and league tables imposed from governments and their agencies. It also derives from the informal, local and commonplace. Furthermore, these popular representations of university participation are powerful and pervasive influences on where an institution is positioned within the field. It is to those commonplace representations that I will now turn.

### **Popular representations of 'going to university'**

The position of an institution is bound up with the popular construction of a status-hierarchy of universities. Individual institutions are deemed as 'elite' and 'proper' by some, or 'second-class' by others. Those

perceptions of status vary according to individuals' own position in relation to the field of higher education, and for some, the language associated with 'university' is evocative of their distance from those 'elite' and 'proper' universities. These become places that are deemed to be 'unwelcoming' and out of reach. Thus each university holds a doubly-constructed position, and can be seen as having two sets of co-ordinates. One is drawn from the kind of data available from league tables and guides, and which is used by the parents and students described as 'strategic and ambitious'. Another is derived from the informal sources of knowledge available from friends and family. Straddling the two, I suggest that institutional position is further defined by the proliferation of information available on the internet, for example, 'blogs' and social-networking sites.

Looked at in this way, universities occupy both real and imagined places in the field. Accumulations of cultural and economic capital situate institutions within a hierarchy, over which symbolic capital establishes its own dimensions. Everyday understandings of what it means to go to a certain university, the benefits and costs of a degree from that institution, produce informal hierarchies of 'good' and 'poor' universities. Such hierarchies are further constructed within the field of sixth-form colleges, where staff, students, and their parents conspire to create and recreate a university's place in the field. As I argued in the previous chapter, an organisation's place in the field is realised through the creation of its doxa, which as I will explore in the next chapter, is generated too through the presentations, guides and chatter of knowledge-sharing at parents' evenings. All these various formal and informal sources of information generate not only articulated, but often unspoken understandings of what constitutes a reasonable university. The huge range of sixth-form colleges, schools and further education colleges help create their own, distinctive doxic understanding of university destinations, and in doing so help shape the field. The

contours of the field are narrowed or broadened, with individual sixth-form institutions tracing distinctive routes across it.

Thus, although the higher education field is determined to a considerable extent by government policy, it is shaped too by the social and cultural factors deriving from the wide range of sixth-form institutions, parents and students. In other words, the potency of government policy is mitigated through a series of indeterminate yet significant sources of power. With the potential for policy interventions to either change or maintain the rules of any given field, such policy imperatives are just one source of power. The field imposes rules on its individuals and institutions, however those rules are also generated through the practices of those individuals.

Furthermore, the hierarchical structure and meaning of higher education is subject to individuals' knowledge and willingness to play the game. As I have emphasised in the previous chapter, the conceptual framework offered by Bourdieu should not be seen as comprising separate tools, and field can only be understood in relation to the habitus of the individuals within and vice versa. Indeed, it is the points of intersection between habitus and field that provide the key foci. For example, the construction of a status-hierarchy is meaningful only for those who are interested in the stakes, and who have the requisite capital to position them in proximity to the field of higher education. Without knowledge of the existence or meaning of 'the Russell Group', for example, or the reputation of any particular institution, or without freedom of geographical mobility, any notion of hierarchy becomes of limited importance.

This means that any uniform concept of university decision-making is misleading. As I will discuss in chapter seven, choices are made through a narrowing or widening of options available and as set within the

framework of habitus, capital and field. The expectations of going to university are associated with an individual's position as determined by their habitus and capital relative to others. Such differences are barely acknowledged in the Government rhetoric around widening participation.

## **Positioning the two sixth-forms**

The second half of this chapter maps out the position of Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College in relation to the field of higher education. Where do their students go and what do they study? How does this compare with national patterns of participation? As I have argued in chapter two, there has been a tendency to conflate socio-economic class with institution, rather than to question whether the institution has an effect on decision-making which is over and above the social class of the individual students within it.

However, before I turn to the two institutions, it is important to say something about the use and availability of national data on patterns of university participation. Looking at data on socio-economic class, school type and university destinations, the difficulties are immediately obvious. UCAS-provided statistical data is rendered problematic by its high proportion of unclassifiable data. The statistics offered by students' school type and socio-economic classification are skewed by high numbers of 'unclassified' or 'unknown' parental occupations. The classification scheme maps parental occupation to one of seven groups, and an eighth group consists of those students listed as 'unclassified', but who represent between 12% and 30% of students within any given school type. Similarly, UCAS data on students' higher education destinations (of those accepting places in 2007), classified almost 30% with a socio-economic group as 'unknown'. The size of the 'unknown'

group makes it difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions from such data.

The data derived from Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College are offered as case studies from which to see the distinctiveness of the two institutions' position in the field. There is no attempt to compare one institution's socio-economic profile with the other. Instead, the intention is to emphasise that individuals' educational practices, for example their UCAS choices, cannot be explored without simultaneously looking at where the institution is positioned in relation to the field of higher education.

The following analysis is taken from data of those students leaving both institutions at the end of a single academic year. The leavers comprised 117 students from Grayshott Grammar and 277 from Winterbourne College. The Winterbourne College students were limited to those who studied for A-level examinations. The data on individual students' destination enables us to chart the institution's place in the field. Moreover, each sixth-form institution accumulates its own stock of cultural capital in the form of the university destinations and qualifications of each successive student cohort.

### **Geographical spread**

The table below shows the different geographical patterns of students' university choices. University destinations were classified according to the following distance bands:

Local:                      the same city

Regional: no more than 50 miles away  
National: in the United Kingdom  
International: outside the United Kingdom

**Table 2: Distance travelled to university by sixth-form institution.**

Percentages ( ) show the students as a percentage of their particular institution

Sixth-form	Distance				Total
	Local	Regional	National	International	
GG	2(1.7%)	5(4.3%)	108(92.3%)	2(1.7%)	117
WBC	58(20.9%)	102(36.8%)	117(42.2%)	0	277
Total	60	107	225	2	394

It is clear from this data that students from Winterbourne College (WBC) have a significantly higher propensity to choose a local institution, with some 21% staying local compared to just under 2% of Grayshott Grammar (GG). The decision to study regionally was made by just under 37% of those at Winterbourne College, compared with only 4% of Grayshott Grammar students. University destinations classified as 'national' were by far the most common choice in Grayshott Grammar, with 92% of students choosing to do so. This compared with 42% of those at Winterbourne College.

### **Studying locally and in the region**

This data sample contrasts with research provided in a UCAS report into the distance travelled by students (2007). The UCAS team found that local applicants, who were defined as travelling less than 12 miles, were correlated with the category of sixth-form institution, and furthermore, that this correlation was stronger than that of socio-economic classification. This suggests that sixth-form institution has an influence on university decision-making and that this is over and above the

relationship with students' socio-economic class. UCAS found the highest percentage of local choosers were from FE Colleges, and of just over 85,000 students who applied to local institutions, 12% were from sixth-form colleges, and with just under 4% from independent sixth forms.

The data from my own sample classified those studying regionally if they accepted places at universities ranging from 20 – 50 miles away, although the majority of this category had accepted places at a distance of between 40 and 50 miles. When I explored the reasons for the tendency for Winterbourne's students to choose regionally, this was explained by the college's Careers Advisor in terms of a commonly stated desire to remain in the south of England, 'to move not too far away from family and friends'. Students' decisions across Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College are patterned across different geographies and the most striking difference being Winterbourne's 20% of students studying locally compared with less than 2% of Grayshott's. With more than a half of Winterbourne's students studying within 50 miles from that institution, and with the Careers Advisor's articulation of a positive narrative of that choice, the college establishes a doxic understanding of local and regional university participation. To study locally or regionally is a normal and acceptable preference. Conversely, for those students at Grayshott Grammar, the vast majority, over 90%, study nationally, and the institution establishes a norm of university participation as embracing a more definite break from home.

The tendency of students to remain local is one associated with constraint and lack of choice (Reay 2005, Archer 2001). However, far less attention has been given to regional choices. From the Careers Advisor's perspective, the reasons for Winterbourne College students to study in the region are positive. I suggest there is less likely to be an association with regional choices and the financial constraints so



commonly associated with those making *local* university choices. Studying regionally would be likely to necessitate leaving home, and yet regional university participation suggests a deliberate attempt to retain geographical and family connections. Where a wealth of academic research has presented particular kinds of students who go to university as making a 'break' from their families, the students from Winterbourne College can be seen as reconciling university participation with the familiar. Therefore it is difficult to explain regional choices as reflecting a deficit model of university decision-making. Instead, the experience of 'going to university' for regional and local students is one that reconciles continuity and change, with 'university' being incorporated, to greater or lesser extent, into their normal lives.

The significance of geographic location as a factor of decision-making is explored further in chapter seven when I discuss the students' narratives of UCAS choices.

### **Studying nationally and internationally**

The decision to study nationally presents a very different kind of 'going to university', and one which I suggest necessitates a more decisive break from the familiar. Some 92% of Grayshott Grammar students and 48% of Winterbourne College students were classified as 'national' choosers, having accepted places more than 50 miles away, and the group was skewed towards those opting for universities at distances of between 80 and 120 miles. As I will outline in chapter seven, there were clearly-articulated narratives of 'leaving home' and 'moving away', with the sense of limitless choice and excitement of a new city or town to discover. I suggest that the decision to study nationally is part and

parcel of some students' freedom from financial constraints, but also a mark of their confidence in a future of limitless opportunities.

I will now turn to look at the students' destinations by university 'type'. I have classified the options according to the following: Russell Group; 1994; Modern and Specialist.

### Status of higher education institution

As can be seen in Table 3 below, there were clear differences in the proportion of each sixth-form's students attending the prestigious, Russell Group universities. Some 57% of students from Grayshott accepted Russell group offers, compared with only 23% of students from Winterbourne.

**Table 3: Higher education institution by type**

% ( ) shows the percentage of students within their institution

Sixth-form	Higher Education Institution				Total
	Russell	1994	Modern	Specialist	
GG	67(57.3%)	24(20.5%)	21(17.9%)	5(4.3%)	117
WC	63(22.7%)	62(22.4%)	152(54.9%)	0	277
Total	130	86	173	5	394

Just over 20% of Grayshott students accepted places at 1994-group universities, and Winterbourne College sent a similar percentage, with just over 22% of its students accepting places at universities in the same group. The most striking difference was in terms of students attending modern universities, and Grayshott sent just under 18% of its students to modern universities, compared with Winterbourne College's 55%. Whilst it might be reasonable to assume that the different

patterns of university acceptances are attributable to different entry qualifications, the story behind the numbers is complex and opaque.

Therefore in order to understand how Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College map on the field of higher education, I would like to explore their students' entry qualifications in a little more detail. If based on crude UCAS scores alone, Grayshott and Winterbourne present very similar results, however when those total UCAS points are disaggregated, there are significant differences in terms of subjects studied and how the UCAS scores are made up.

## **Subjects**

Although partially accountable to size of institution, students studied a wider range of A-level subjects at Winterbourne College. Academic and more vocationally-oriented A-level courses were offered, and this variety was found too in the subjects chosen at degree level. Where Grayshott Grammar students had a tendency to study what might be described as 'traditionally academic' or high-status vocational subjects, the Winterbourne College students' choice was broader.

What was especially striking about the two institutions was the breadth of vocational undergraduate courses chosen by the Winterbourne College students. In particular, there was a diverse range of subjects 'allied to medicine', although very few students left the college to study medicine. I asked the Careers Advisor if he could account for why a very small number of students applied to medical school when high numbers studied Biology and Chemistry. He told me that students needed to have more imagination and a greater sense of realism about the opportunities for those studying science. Printed guidance from the Careers Service stated that the 'strong leaning towards medically-related professions....is perhaps disproportionate to the breadth of

opportunities....' Students who expressed an initial interest in studying to be a 'doctor' frequently opted for nursing, physiotherapy and pharmacy. For those studying Biology and Chemistry at A-level, their degree courses ranged from medicine to zoology, and included a diverse range of subjects outside of the scientific field. A similarly dispersed pattern of university subject choices was found for those studying Physics. Through its Careers Advisor, Winterbourne College encouraged students to look beyond the 'stereotypical' career of medicine and to consider 'more realistic' options within the wider field of health service careers. Thus, on the one hand, the advice aims at widening choice, but on the other hand, it is encouraging students to remove themselves from the competition for the most elite courses.

By contrast, Grayshott Grammar's students selected subjects from a relatively narrow range of choices available. History, Languages, Medicine and Engineering dominated their university choices, with those subjects making up 57% of the total university courses chosen. The institution can be seen as narrowing choices, and steering its students towards a limited range of careers. As I explore in chapter five, via a variety of means, Grayshott's students are given a very explicit message about the nature of subjects studied for both A-level and future degree course.

The data on degree subject choices for Grayshott and Winterbourne can be compared with national data available from UCAS. For example, 9% of Grayshott's students left to study medicine, and just over 1% of students from Winterbourne College. This compares with national data of 3% for the same year. For engineering, the national figure was just under 6%, and this compared with 9% for Grayshott, and 2% for Winterbourne College. Whereas 6% of Grayshott students opted to study business or management, this compared with 12% at Winterbourne and 13% nationally.

Let me now discuss how entry to the field of higher education is regulated through the variety of entry requirements of its institutions.

## **Entry requirements**

Before looking at the students' UCAS scores, I would first like to consider these alongside the variety of post-compulsory qualifications available. The vast range of qualifications offering entry to higher education is evident from the information provided by UCAS ([www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk)). However, I will argue that the presentation of entry requirements set out by some universities serves to structure the field along enduringly traditional, 'academic' requirements, and for certain subjects or particular universities, through further sifting of candidates beyond those qualifications.

Following implementation of recommendations from the Schwartz Report into transparency and consistency of admissions to higher education, a recent review of progress some three years later found that:

There is little difference in the type of qualifications that institutions accept. However, there are significant variations in how these qualifications are publicised, for example, while institutions state that they accept vocational qualifications they fail to publicise the fact that they are accepted to the same degree as academic qualifications (DIUS: 2008).

Although I have chosen to track just A-level students from the two sixth-form institutions, A-levels are one model of study amongst a range of vocational and diploma qualifications identified as offering

entry to higher education institutions. A sample of university prospectuses confirmed there was indeed a varied presentation of entry requirements for undergraduate programmes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 'most recent' universities provided the most clearly stated message to potential candidates without A-level examinations, with the full range of vocational and diploma qualifications set out alongside A-level requirements.

Among the more research-intensive universities there was a tendency to continue to emphasise traditional academic qualifications, with references to considering other qualifications 'on a case-by-case basis', and with Oxford stating that those candidates with vocational qualifications were 'welcome to apply, but may need to take additional academic qualifications to make a competitive application'. (Prospectus 2009/10). As well as an emphasis on A-level qualifications, the research-intensive universities were more likely to express entry requirements in terms of particular grades, rather than a total of UCAS points. For Oxbridge, the offer was typically AAA, whilst the offer for other Russell Group and the 1994 Group universities ranged from AAB to BBB, although some expressed their requirements in terms of UCAS points.

For Oxbridge, and for undergraduate courses in medicine and law, the A-level grades in themselves formed only a part of the overall picture. There were entry requirements over and above both A-level grades and UCAS points. Students applying to Oxbridge were typically required to sit additional examinations, provide examples of written work and attend interview. Elsewhere, medical and law students were usually required to complete an aptitude test before being invited for interview. Whilst on the one hand these measures reflect over-subscription of particular courses or universities, they can be seen as a means to filter candidates through criteria that are intangible and opaque. The

processes assume a mysterious and enigmatic status, with just a perfunctory search on the internet providing a glimpse of the myths about the 'Oxbridge interview'. Similarly, potential medics are faced with a plethora of guides and 'unspoken rules' about how to secure a place.

On the one hand, the information gathered from interview or additional examination offer institutions new ways to differentiate between candidates with similar qualifications. On the other hand, a space is created between academic achievement as defined by formal qualifications, and their conversion to the reward of a sought-after place within an elite university or oversubscribed course. There was no clear articulation of what this might be, either from the Careers Advisors in both institutions or the UCAS Co-ordinator in Grayshott Grammar. This is a murky, ill-defined space which comprises subjective and cultural distinctions available to those students who are equipped with forms of capital that are symbolic and organisationally-specific. These are the more subtle markers of distinction, the 'tie-breakers' and the classifications made to determine 'people like us'.

As Grenfell observes, 'the reality is that access has to be limited eventually because of the scarcity of scholastic prizes...the least academic hiccup results in total failure....differentiation becomes arbitrary...' (2004: 63). However, unlike the popular perception of such students' success due to being endowed with high levels of confidence, I suggest that their means of distinction is not *in itself* from intangible, elusive qualities. Rather, and as I explore in chapter seven, the 'natural, effortless, destined' students secure access to the elite universities through possession of cultural and social capital. These stocks of capital position them in close proximity to the elite universities and enable them to manoeuvre themselves between the cracks of formal equality. Their movement from sixth-form to elite university is so

'natural' as to be barely noticed. But it is these apparently natural and intangible qualities that the concepts of habitus and capital go some way to solidify.

Where entry requirements for the most prestigious universities can be seen as reinforcing a sense of exclusivity, the 'more recent universities' strive to position themselves as inclusive. For those students with A-levels, there was a wide variation in how these entry requirements were articulated. The following requirements were taken from the prospectuses of five such universities in the region, with the undergraduate course indicated in parenthesis:

2 A-levels (with no specification of grades) (Humanities)  
200-280 UCAS points depending on undergraduate programme  
300 UCAS points (Psychology)  
100 points gained from 2 A-levels (Business Studies)

The range of qualifications available, and the way in which higher education institutions determine their validity reminds us of the contextual specificity in which cultural capital is put to work. Each qualification has a value ascribed by the awarding body, and through its representation in the array of league tables which rank each sixth-form according to students' qualifications. Nevertheless, the value of any such qualification is dependent on how it is used in the field. That is to say that each A-level or vocational award will be defined according to the relative location of any particular higher education institution. Furthermore, its 'worth' is subject to change over time as institutions strive to use entry requirements to shift their own position within the field of higher education institutions. Thus the return on an academic credential is defined in relation to the institution's place relative to others and its trajectory within the field.



## UCAS scores

The students' UCAS scores calculated as a total number of tariff points suggests a picture of two sixth-forms which are producing high-scoring students. However, when looking at individual cases, it becomes clear that UCAS points in themselves are not necessarily helpful indicators of equivalence in entry qualifications.

Table 4 below lists the students' total UCAS scores, together with the percentage of students with scores in that band at the institution.

**Table 4: UCAS Scores by institution**

UCAS points	Number	GG	WC
360+	180	61 (52.1%)	119 (43%)
340-359	44	10 (8.5%)	34 (12.3%)
320-339	42	10 (8.5%)	32 (11.6%)
300-319	35	12 (10.3)	23 (8.3%)
280-299	26	7 (6%)	19 (6.9%)
260-279	16	8 (6.8%)	8 (2.9%)
240-259	13	6 (5.1%)	7 (2.5%)
239 or less	38	3 (2.6%)	35 (12.6%)

As the table shows, the institutions' UCAS scores are not markedly different, other than at the lowest band of those scoring less than 239 points. Some 60% in Grayshott Grammar and 55% of Winterbourne College left their institutions with at least 340 UCAS points. The score threshold of 340 UCAS points is interesting because it can be seen as a points-based equivalent of a typical offer within the Russell Group. For example, the prospectuses commonly listed AAB as an entry

requirement. However, there were many different ways in which the scores above 340 points might be achieved, and as I will discuss further below, there were some noticeable differences in the profile of individual students from the two institutions.

Furthermore, there was a greater tendency for students at Winterbourne College to study four or five A-levels, whereas Grayshott Grammar students were more likely to study three, and rarely, four A-levels. Hence, students from Winterbourne College were more likely to have a UCAS total made up from a larger number of individual A-level scores. For example, whilst an aggregate score of 340 points was commonly derived from a combination of AAB at Grayshott Grammar, by contrast, scores of ABDD or even ACDEE were found at Winterbourne College.

Taken as simple UCAS scores, there were markedly different choices made from similar aggregate scores. For those scoring 340+ points at Grayshott, 75% accepted places in the Russell Group. By contrast, of those with 340+ points at Winterbourne, just 36% accepted Russell Group places. Looking at a slightly lower threshold, a total score of 300+ points offered 66% of Grayshott Grammar students a place at a Russell Group university. This compared with only 29% of Winterbourne students. 19% of Grayshott students achieving 300+ points chose a 1994 Group university, and this compared with 26% of Winterbourne students. Just 12% of students from Grayshott with 300+ UCAS points left for a 'modern' university, and this compared with 45% of Winterbourne students with the same total points.

There were differences too when looking at the distance travelled and UCAS points. For students with 300+ points, just under a half of those from Winterbourne chose national institutions, compared with 97% of Grayshott's students. Some 37% Winterbourne students with 300+

points chose regional universities compared with only 2% of Grayshott students.

Any attempt to compare the scores of students from these two institutions with data at a national level is complicated by the publication of league tables using the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority tariff points for A levels, which as well as assigning points for a far more diverse range of qualifications, including those from vocational courses and the International Baccalaureate, provides a different weighting to A-level scores. For example, the QCA tariff allocates 270 points to an A grade A-level, and 150 points to an E grade. The ratio of 270:150 compares with a ratio of 120:40 under the UCAS tariff. Converting the two sixth-forms' UCAS points to QCA points provides very different points scores, with students' total QCA points obscuring stark variations in A level grades. For example, students achieving 3 grade As will score 810 points, but students achieving 3 grade Cs and 1 grade D will score the same total points.

With their different tariffs, the national league tables made the process of mapping the sixth-forms to their national comparators problematic, and further emphasised the degree to which the field is crisscrossed by conflicting institutional and political agendas. In chapter 5, when I look at Grayshott Grammar more closely, I will explore further how that particular institution enables conversion of A-level points to currency in the field of higher education.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter I have argued that amidst government rhetoric associated with widening participation, the field of universities remains

structured by very different kinds of institution. As chapter two discussed, the benefits from attending university vary according to the nature of the subject and institution. Thus, to suggest a uniform experience and similar rewards from 'going to university' is misleading. So, within the vocabulary used to describe 'university', there lies a multiplicity of meanings and rewards. I have therefore argued for the need to look beyond the rhetoric, and to deconstruct what is offered by an assortment of vastly different institutions. Moreover, this range of universities can be seen as existing on a hierarchy which, at present, is based on status attributed through historical factors associated with traditional, research universities, which represent only a minority of the 278 institutions offering undergraduate study.

I have found Bourdieu's concept of field a helpful way to deconstruct the hierarchy of university provision. Furthermore, I have shown how the two sixth-form colleges relate to specific and distinctive parts of that field. I have argued that universities are differentially positioned within the field through their accumulation of capital over time. Therefore the field should be seen as placed on a matrix of time and power, and in mapping the field of universities in relation to the field of power, I have argued for the extension of the concept of power. There needs to be an understanding of power as existing beyond the political power exerted by Government, but rather the informal power produced through the everyday and sometimes banal conversations of parents, teachers and students. These are multiple and diffuse sources of power, and which contribute to the popular constructions of what it means to go to a particular type of university. Therefore, each institution's position is determined through its ability to respond to the changing demands stemming from those various forms of power. Universities are thus mapped onto a 'status hierarchy' according to their dual co-ordinates of formal and informal power.

Through an analysis of the students' university destinations from Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College, there is no doubt that the two institutions occupy quite different positions in relation to the field of higher education. These differences related to geographical location and status of university. The conversion of UCAS scores to university places revealed stark differences in terms of where and how their students used the capital accrued through A-level qualifications.

The students' geographical patterns were distinctive. The tendency for Winterbourne to send its students locally and regionally was something that the Careers Advisor explained as a positive and deliberate choice. Such patterns of university attendance suggest that the concept of university for those students is about continuity and integration. There seems to me, to be an interesting symmetry here. Set against the commonly-held assumptions of embedded and contingent choosers as representing binaries of continuity and change, there is instead a sense that the local and regional choosers so often described in terms of deficit, regarded university as an experience to be positively reconciled with the familiar.

Grayshott Grammar could be seen as occupying a position in close proximity to the elite universities, and the strategies used by this institution as it plays a very different game to Winterbourne, will be explored further in the next chapter. Questions are raised as to how such a marked difference is promoted, and whether the institution is simply a reflection of its predominantly middle-class intake. So, in the next chapter I will focus specifically on Grayshott Grammar to understand more about how its distinctive position in relation to the national and prestigious universities is constructed.

## **Chapter 5: Moving closer to the field**

### **Introduction**

This chapter has as its focus Grayshott Grammar, and its conceptual emphasis is on Bourdieu's notions of symbolic capital and 'gift-exchange'. I will argue that by moving the research lens more closely towards Grayshott Grammar, classed practices can be seen as played out in the relationship between parents and a fee-paying institution. The chapter accents the symbolic dimension of those classed practices, and I argue that Grayshott Grammar is a producer of taste for a particular kind of university participation. Furthermore, through a process of narrowing boundaries and steering students towards 'elite' universities, the institution successfully converts cultural capital to symbolic capital.

Statistical data from chapter four illustrated that Grayshott Grammar sends its students to a narrow segment of the higher education field, with its university destinations characterised as 'national' and predominantly within the Russell and 1994 groups. Drawing on this data, I argued that Grayshott Grammar occupied a position in close proximity to the field of 'elite' universities. Moreover, and despite broadly similar UCAS tariff scores, its position contrasted with that of Winterbourne College, which was more closely aligned to the so-called modern universities in the region and locally. The chapter has been developed after reflection on the diaries and field notes compiled during my time spent in the sixth-form. I am able to draw from material gathered through observation, interviews and attendance at a variety of formal and informal events held over a two year period. Through this

accumulation of richly detailed material, my aim is to add subtlety and real-life authenticity to the commonplace and undifferentiated representations of an independent institution.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I consider ways in which the institution produces cultural capital through its setting boundaries of university choice. I then discuss what I term as the 'sifting and sorting' of its students towards particular universities and courses within what is already a narrow range of institutions. The chapter then explores how the sixth-form displays and represents its cultural capital as symbolic capital, and how this is consumed by parents. I conclude that Grayshott Grammar's proximity to the elite universities is established through a series of correspondences; namely, the cultural capital valued by those institutions; the sixth-form's representation and display of such, and its consumption by students and parents.

## **Creating symbolic capital**

Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as:

the form that one or another of these species takes when it is grasped through categories of perception that *recognise* its specific logic or, if you prefer, misrecognise the arbitrariness of its possession and accumulation (1977:192).

Cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications is 'grasped through' Grayshott's institutionally-constructed 'categories of perception'. Its 'misrecognition' is as universally-desirable qualifications, to which access is limited not only by students' intellectual ability and effort, but by their 'superior' taste or knowledge of the university hierarchy. The concept of misrecognition helps us to understand how

Grayshott Grammar determines its product as valuable and meaningful. Above all, its effective formation is achieved not through holding intrinsic value, but instead in the way it is represented as legitimate currency in relation to the higher education field.

As I will discuss further below, the production and transmission of symbolic capital is realised through a process of classification and discrimination between different A-level subjects, sixth-form colleges and university destinations. Looked at in this way, the Grayshott Grammar 'product' is cultural capital in the form of A-level certificates and university destinations. However, the value of that cultural capital is realised through its being converted to symbolic capital.

The process of conversion relies on establishing what Bourdieu describes as a *doxic* agreement of student and parental attitudes and expectations, whereby the sixth-form inculcates understandings of what cultural capital is valuable or worthless as exchange in the educational field. Furthermore, this doxic understanding should be seen in relation to the institution's own position in the field. Certain A-level subjects, degree courses and universities are legitimated, others are categorised as inferior or non-choices. These classifications are achieved through the dynamic of Grayshott Grammar's past, present and future trajectory in the field.

This first section of the chapter begins with a look at how the institution establishes expectations about the type of subjects its students should choose for A-levels. I will then explore the ways that university destinations are constructed according to narrowly-defined boundaries of choice.



## **‘A-levels as currency in the great sweetie shop that is UCAS’ (Headmaster in a speech to parents)**

For a majority of students, joining the sixth-form was a transfer from within the senior school. As part of this transition, the students’ choice of A-level subjects was discussed with class teachers and then formalised via a ‘headmaster interview’. I observed a day of these interviews, and so I saw at first hand the process as it unfolded. Each student was invited to attend the ‘headmaster’ interview during the autumn term of year 11, being their final year prior to A-level study. I saw the interviews as evoking a particular time and place in which the sixth-form actively attempted to impose its own system of classification of academic choices.

The students were first asked to talk about their predicted GCSE grades. For students whose grades were predicted as lower than A or A\* the headmaster talked about the need to ‘eliminate ‘B’ grades’, and told students that ‘the key to good GCSEs is to get good grades across the board’. Students were questioned about the length of time spent on homework, and they were provided with very detailed and specific advice about the number of hours they were expected to spend during weekdays and over the week-end. They were given instructions to attend ‘clinics’ held during the lunch-time break and asked to talk to their subject tutors about how to improve results. The headmaster explained that if they were ‘aiming for the best’ they would need at least 5 A\* grades at GCSE.

The interview was a discussion of the students’ intended A-level courses too. The sixth-form’s curriculum consisted of 24 subjects, with the emphasis on traditional, academic subjects. Subjects were designated by the headmaster as ‘good’, ‘rigorous’, ‘easy’ or ‘soft’. To reinforce his

message, he quoted from lists of A-levels which had been widely published by national newspapers at that time. Students expressing an interest in such a subject were warned against 'being seduced by Mickey Mouse'. Certain subjects were therefore augmented or diminished through an institutionally-understood classification, and one which was in relation to Oxbridge and medical schools in particular. Academic qualifications were cultural capital measured along a symbolic scale, with the possession of so-called 'traditional' or 'hard' subjects conferring institutionally-valued capital to the individual.

The interviews served to establish future university destinations within a hierarchy dominated by Oxbridge and the medical schools. However, the interviews were simply one example of the institution's attempt to demarcate the field of possibilities. This was an occasion when the sixth-form, via the headmaster, could be seen as constructing symbolic boundaries: universities to consider and others to dismiss. These choices were key signifiers of institutional reputation, with individual students' university destinations embodying the institution's symbolically-recognised capital, and then contributing to its reproduction and use in the future.

The 'headmaster interviews' were brief, each lasting just 15 minutes. His style was at times imposing, and at others affable, but his message convincing and powerfully expressed. During each interview the conversation was punctuated by his recording of actions for himself, students and their class tutors. On the one hand, the interviews served a practical purpose, offering a tool to align students' academic ambitions with the sixth-form's curriculum offer. On the other hand, the interviews served to construct a shared understanding of the specific capital valorised by the institution.

As well as framing university choices, the interviews were opportunities to distinguish the sixth-form from local alternatives.

The headmaster promoted Grayshott Grammar as an institution, which in his words was a place 'for those who were serious about going to a top university'. If students expressed any doubts about their intention to continue through to the sixth-form, they were advised that to leave at this stage in their education amounted to 'throwing everything away'. I saw how in those cases, the headmaster pointed to data illustrating that future A-level grades would be compromised if students moved to Winterbourne College. To study A-levels at Grayshott Grammar was presented as the *only* path to these 'top universities'.

The interviews formed one part of a longer process of steering and sifting students. I will now discuss how the process continued as students entered the sixth-form as expectations were established, and as paths were set out in front of them.

### **'At least 90% of our students secure their first choice of university' (prospectus)**

The institution's publicity material makes strong claims about its students' university successes. The prospectus stated that 'over 90% of Grayshott Grammar students gained places at their first choice university this year, including Oxbridge and Russell Group Universities'. However, as I will discuss below, the notion of 'first choice' was problematic. Choices were arrived at after significant institutional intervention, which I have expressed as a process of 'sifting and steering'. Students at Grayshott Grammar were provided with comprehensive and well-organised support, but their choices were made within an institutional system which led them towards particular university decisions.

The timetable set out under UCAS required applications, other than those for Oxbridge and medical school, to be received by mid-December. However, the sixth-form adopted a much earlier set of deadlines for all its students, and the process began in May. The sixth-form designated one of its teaching staff to act as a 'UCAS Co-ordinator', and my meeting with him revealed the extensive and time-consuming nature of the institution's approach towards UCAS applications. He explained that all students were initially interviewed by their form tutor, and at that meeting they were asked to indicate the universities and courses they had identified as possible choices.

The students' one-to-one interviews were followed by a series of group meetings led by subject specialists. The informal sessions were times for staff to suggest courses and institutions. The role of the subject specialists was described as providing 'up-to-date knowledge of developments in your chosen field'. Although the timetable did not require applications to be submitted until mid-December, the UCAS Co-ordinator told me that Grayshott encouraged all students to have their forms sent off during September.

The sixth-form's web-pages and printed material gave prominence to Oxbridge offers, with newsletters celebrating these students above all others, and stating that 'each year up to 20 students receive offers from Oxbridge'. I therefore asked the UCAS Co-ordinator about that process. He described how students were 'selected' as candidates:

*Subject tutors are asked to rank each student in terms of three possible grades. First, those ranked as '1' are candidates considered as having a strong chance, '2' is for those who are seen as having a reasonable chance, and '3' for weak cases. We tend to have about 40 applicants, so about a third of our students apply, and this year we did very well, 16 students received offers.*

When I asked whether those students marked as '3' might still apply to Oxbridge, he said that this was very 'rare' and said that whereas in his previous institutions 'where Oxbridge was the only place that counted', his long association with Grayshott had shown him that parents did not tend to challenge the sixth-form's advice, and were 'just pleased that their son or daughter was going to a good university'. This reflection on the way that parents think about university choices offers an interesting contradiction to the dominant account of middle-class practices characterised by ambition. Furthermore, that the use of private education represents a particularly 'pushy' kind of middle-class parent. The articulation of parents' expectations of Grayshott Grammar is discussed further below. If from the UCAS Co-ordinator's perspective, parents did not communicate a specific expectation, it was still clear that Grayshott Grammar placed significant value on the number of students it sent to Oxbridge.

About 10% of the institution's teaching staff had been to Oxbridge themselves, and many continued to have connections with their former college. The UCAS Co-ordinator described how individual students are guided towards particular colleges over others, and with certain colleges perceived as 'supportive' towards the independent sector. The application process for Grayshott's students was in many ways 'demystified' and rendered a realistic choice for those students identified as academically able to apply.

In chapter seven, I will describe the fine-grained, 'insider' information available to some students; here the sixth-form could be seen as fulfilling a similar role. Through staff relationships and institutional history, the sixth-form provided the kinds of informal, unofficial information not available to those on the 'outside'. I saw Grayshott Grammar as offering cultural capital in its knowledge of Oxbridge's

processes and unspoken rules. Students were able to make subtle distinctions between colleges and courses at Oxbridge, in this way constructing it as a meaningful place.

Grayshott's knowledge of Oxbridge was derived through its relationship with particular colleges and its history of sending students to those colleges. The sixth-form's cultural capital accumulates over time, and is made available for use in the future. However, this accumulation of cultural capital was worked at; and I observed this as no easy or comfortable process. The effortful nature of the Oxbridge relationship was encapsulated by the extensive set of records it held. Students were required to record feedback from their interviews and to make this available to future applicants. These were subjective responses to the Oxbridge experience, with their very personal style revealing the emotions and hopes bound up in each interview. These were rarely accounts of entitlement or confident expectation. The records were glimpses of individual and institutional investment in the field of elite universities.

So if Grayshott invested time and effort into these applications, its position in proximity to Oxbridge was not assured, and its records of student offers over the previous five years showed that less than 15% of its student population went on to Oxbridge. This percentage compared with the London based St Paul's and Westminster independent schools sending almost 50% of their students to Oxbridge each year over the same period (Sutton Trust: 2008). Oxbridge successes were celebrated above all other university offers. The relationship between Grayshott Grammar and Oxbridge was therefore rather tenuous in comparison with more prestigious private schools. However, the minority of Oxbridge offers provided another opportunity to convert cultural capital to symbolic capital. Albeit a fragile

relationship, for Grayshott Grammar, Oxbridge was a stake worth playing for.

### **For those ‘going to a normal person’ university**

For the vast majority of Grayshott’s students, their destination was, as Felicity puts it in chapter seven, to a ‘normal person university’. However, for students like Felicity, the definition of such was constructed within very narrow boundaries. Furthermore, within those boundaries, Grayshott Grammar could be seen as ‘sifting and steering’ students towards particular subjects and institutions. The process was most evident for those who hoped to study medicine. Each year, around 25 of Grayshott’s students expressed an interest in studying medicine, and its institutional programme of general studies included weekly sessions on related topics. Lectures and seminars from professionals involved in medical research or healthcare were promoted and integrated into the timetable for all those students studying chemistry and biology. However, on average only 10 students were offered places at medical school, and the period before UCAS application was one in which many were steered away from making such an application. As I will discuss further below, the discouraging of students to apply for medicine was sometimes a shock and source of disappointment for students and their parents.

The support and guidance offered by Grayshott was extensive and heavily resourced. The UCAS choices were arguably reflections of the institution’s position in the field as much as they were individual choices. However, it would be wrong to see the institution’s symbolic capital as unquestioned or without being subject to resistance. In the final section of this chapter I will discuss how the Grayshott product is consumed, and how that opens up space between its institutional representation

and individual experience of it. But first, let me describe two such displays of institutionally-valued cultural capital, by recounting my observations from its 'Sixth-form and beyond' and 'UCAS' evenings.

### **'Sixth-form and beyond'**

I attended two evenings aimed for students and their parents. At 'the sixth-form and beyond' and UCAS evenings I observed how the events designated as information-giving were articulations and displays of the institution's symbolic capital. As I will discuss below, these events were opportunities for Grayshott Grammar to present its product, to position itself close to the field of elite universities, and at the same to differentiate itself from alternatives.

The 'sixth-form and beyond' evening was held for students (and their parents) who were about to join Grayshott Grammar's sixth-form. It comprised a number of presentations from staff, and students from the year above. Like the 'headmaster interviews', this too was a time and place for the sixth-form to impose meaning and classification of its academic product. The institution and its curriculum were cast in language of exclusivity and distinctiveness.

The production of symbolic capital is realised through creating perceptions of distance or association. As I will discuss below, the headmaster sought to create a gap between Grayshott Grammar and the local state provision, and in particular Winterbourne College. Furthermore, he made close connections with well-known independent schools, seeking to position Grayshott alongside those institutions. Drawing on research published by the Sutton Trust at around that time, he declared he was 'certainly not apologetic' for the institution's position within a list of 'top 100' independent schools. The research's aim was to



accent the inequalities of access to Oxbridge and the so-called 'Sutton Trust 13' group of elite universities. The 'top 100' independent schools were found to have sent 'more than their fair share' of students to such universities. The concept of 'fair share' was derived through disproportionate access determined by a the plotting of institutions' average A-level tariff score per student against the percentage of students receiving offers from Oxbridge or the 'Sutton Trust 13'.

Having positioned Grayshott Grammar within an elite group of independent institutions, the headmaster's presentation ignored what might otherwise be considered as local competition within the fee-paying sector. There are three independent-sector alternatives within the local area, however none was mentioned. Instead, he used the opportunity to establish the sixth-form's A-level provision in contrast to that provided by local state-sector alternatives. His presentation attempted to distinguish the sixth-form's traditionally academic curriculum from the more diverse and expansive range of subjects provided by Winterbourne College, which approximately 10% of Grayshott's students joined after completing GCSEs. With humour that seemed well-received by parents, he again urged students not to be 'seduced by Mickey mouse', adding that 'A-levels are the coinage that will earn prizes in the great sweetie shop that is UCAS'.

My observation of the evening was an institution seeking to mark itself out as offering a very different product from Winterbourne College's much broader range of A-level subjects. By denigrating a number of 'A' level courses as 'soft' options, the Headmaster could be seen as not only reflecting admissions requirements of particular universities, but also as implicitly labelling Winterbourne College as an inferior institution. Aware that 10% of Grayshott's students left for Winterbourne, the headmaster could be seen as recognising and responding to the existence of its competitor. By using popular perceptions of 'dumbing

down', the headmaster sought to distinguish Grayshott Grammar as offering traditional qualifications leading to long-established universities.

## **UCAS Evening**

The UCAS evening was held for parents of students during their first term at sixth-form. The evening comprised a number of speakers invited to talk about various aspects and stages of the university application process. Ostensibly an information-giving event, the programme served to display the sixth-form's symbolic capital. In particular, the choice of university speakers offered a fascinating illustration of the relationship between Grayshott Grammar and the field of higher education.

A classics professor from Oxbridge was given 'top of the bill' status, being the only speaker offered two opportunities to talk during the evening. The prominence given to him was conveyed too by the headmaster's indulgence and deference towards him. The professor's presentation style was informal, anecdotal and tangential, with little of what might be described 'information' or 'fact'. No longer having a role in his college's admissions process, he talked in generalities about studying at Oxbridge and gave advice on how to choose a degree subject. It was difficult to see the professor's role as anything other than signifying the sixth-form's classification of universities, and as a means to reinforce the position of Grayshott Grammar in close proximity to Oxbridge.

Moreover, the professor's role served to consecrate the product offered by Grayshott Grammar. Warm praise was given of its tutors and the headmaster, with the sixth-form described as offering students a 'Rolls Royce' service. Parents and students witnessed a visible and real-life

endorsement of the two institutions. The message to parents seemed clear, as if the professor had said: 'I am part of an elite university, this sixth-form recognises that I am, and so should you. Your child may or may not be offered a place at Oxbridge, however the support offered by Grayshott is not in question.' The relationship between sixth-form and Oxbridge is validated, and thus the legitimacy of its product symbolically conferred.

The Oxbridge presentation contrasted with the evening's more formal, Power-point enabled deliveries. The rest of the programme was characterised as much by who was included as by who was absent. A representative from the university located geographically closest to the sixth-form delivered a presentation about the process of application for student finance. There was no information about that institution's undergraduate courses, and this local, modern university was arguably designated as a non-choice for Grayshott's students.

For the first time, the programme included a representative from a university within the 1994-group. The Head of Recruitment was introduced as representing a 'hidden gem' within an 'up and coming' institution, and one that 'perhaps parents had not considered before'. The presentation appeared polished and professional, with clearly-expressed information about that institution's entry requirements and a step-by-step explanation of the university admission process.

The Head of Recruitment positioned his university through references to a number of league tables. Although such data was described with some degree of cynicism, it was nevertheless used to place the university alongside larger and more traditional institutions. The Head of Recruitment promoted his institution as having developed a strong reputation amongst more well-known and longer-established alternatives. This was a 'worked at', formal presentation which stood in

stark contrast with that given by Oxbridge. The classics professor had no need to make such claims, or refer to league tables; the university's dominant status within the field of higher education was tacitly assumed.

The two formal events described above offer examples of how the sixth-form creates a symbolic product through the establishment of classifications and categories. This was achieved firstly through the sixth-form's creation of distinctions and similarities between itself and other sixth-forms. Distance is constructed between Grayshott Grammar and the local sixth-form colleges, and with greatest emphasis on Winterbourne College, which was recognised as the most serious alternative. Secondly, it is achieved through the sixth-form's reinforcement and legitimating of the dominant hierarchy of higher education institutions. The prominence of Oxbridge was emphasised, and this relationship provided an emblematic means of positioning Grayshott Grammar close to the field of elite universities.

### **Consuming symbolic capital**

I have described Grayshott Grammar as producer and supplier of symbolic capital, and I now turn towards the fee-paying parents who are its consumers. I have argued that the sixth-form's product is one realised through a process of conversion, with cultural capital in the form of academic credentials and university destinations transformed into symbolic capital. Moreover, I have argued that this symbolic capital is legitimated due to its close correspondence to the field of elite universities. I want now to look at how that capital is consumed by the parents who pay Grayshott Grammar's fees.

The process of consumption is, I suggest, achieved through Grayshott Grammar's ability to reconcile its institutionally-valued capital with

parental tastes and preferences for university destinations. Without the correspondence of its product to the desire for consumption, the institution is unable to create and maintain its position in the field. Symbolic capital is valued only through its being perceived as valuable, and the sixth-form's success therefore lies in its ability to encourage parents' approval of its product. The reconciliation of institution and parental taste is realised through the codes and symbols associated with the middle classes' long association with higher education. The parents at Grayshott Grammar are not exclusively middle-class, and approximately 20% would be classified as 'self-employed', 'small business owners' or 'skilled manual workers'. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, these labels have little meaning within a Bourdieuan framework. Instead of talking about class labels, Bourdieu encourages us to see individuals as positioned in relation to the field. The institution helps to create or reinforce those relationships to the field of higher education, through its drawing boundaries and creating, as Bourdieu puts it, 'the distances that need to be kept' (1984:472). The sixth-form's product is consumed through what it is *not* as much as what it *is*. The alliance between institution and parents is a partnership based on creating distance and making distinctions. Whilst there is a visible and ostentatious display of middle-class codes, for example, through the value placed on particular kinds of sport, music and drama, these are decorations and embellishments which serve to camouflage the production of cultural capital.

Grayshott Grammar's symbolic capital is consumed through its resonance with the parents' expectations of a private education. The purchase of private education is a very visible marker of parental choice, and one which is bound up with notions of middle-classness. Thus through having the economic capital to pay for a private education, parents are able to mark themselves as middle-class. The choice of a private school is a very particular classed practice, which classifies

parents as obviously as accent, dress and home. Bourdieu argues that 'a class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being...*' and the decision to send children to a fee-paying institution can be seen as a way for parents to define themselves in relation to others (Bourdieu 1984: 483). The parents' consumption of a private education is an identification *with*, rather than necessarily a belonging *to*, the middle-classes. Thus, in making the decision to send their children to private school, the parents are engaged in a classed practice of differentiation and distinction associated with how Grayshott Grammar is recognised and acknowledged by other parents.

I have discussed how the congruence between parental expectation and institutionally-derived capital helps us to understand how the institution is positioned in the field, but the relationship is not always straightforward. As I will discuss below, the agreement between parents and Grayshott Grammar was sometimes marked by conflict and disappointment. The financial transaction is not one offering explicit or transparent returns. Instead, the relationship between institution and parents is characterised by vagueness and allusions. The relationship operates through representations of class, with all the imagery and allusions synonymous with the stereotypes of middle-class culture. The agreement between parents and institution is caught up in the imagination of a middle-class lifestyle symbolised in particular by certain sporting and musical tastes.

To explain how this symbolic capital is consumed, it is necessary to look at the nature of the agreement between institution and parent. The sixth-form as an institution and its parents as consumers are engaged in what is objectively an economic transaction underpinned by a legal contract. However, in looking beyond its narrowly economic basis it allows us to better grasp how the product is consumed. In the overtly economic transaction of school fee payment, the exchange is one

practised and experienced through the medium of the symbolic. Moreover, I am suggesting that the effectiveness of this exchange is in its denial as such. The sixth-form and its parents work together to conceal the objective, economic interest of the contract. To discuss these ideas further, I am going to draw from Bourdieu's analysis of 'gift exchange', through which he illustrates the practical logic underpinning human practice. Indeed, 'gift exchange' serves as an illustration of the fundamental principles of Bourdieu's sociological project.

## **Gift exchange**

The analysis of 'gift-exchange' provides an illustration of what Bourdieu saw as the inadequacy of structural analysis on the one hand, and phenomenological 'lived experience' on the other hand. For Bourdieu, 'gift-exchange' offers a means to understand human practice as both strategic and predictable. The individual habitus is strategic in the sense of the application of practical knowledge of the unspoken rules of the field. The individual 'logic of practice' is based on his or her feel for the game, and with structural regularity without 'mechanical interlockings' or 'cycles of reciprocity' (Bourdieu in Schrift 1997: 190). Developing his analysis through practice in pre-Capitalist societies (notably his ethnographic work of the Kabylia tribes), I suggest those examples translate beyond that particular time and place.

A Bourdieuan analysis of gift-exchange enables us to open up the space between *any* transaction or exchange, whether that is based on explicitly financial terms, as in the contract entered into between buyer and seller, or in the gift offered in the generous sense. The analogy of the gift enables us to see even a generous exchange as based on economic interest, but importantly, one which is practised through its being symbolic, complicit and disguised. However, I am arguing here

that the relationship between Grayshott Grammar and its fee-paying parents is an *economic* transaction which is mediated through the symbolic. The symbolic capital produced by the institution and consumed by its parents serves to conceal or camouflage the inherently financial basis of the transaction. Thus, in the displays of its students' academic, sporting and musical triumphs, the institution is promoting a product as not only distinctive and desirable, but at the same time, as part and parcel of a middle-class childhood.

Bourdieu's distinctive approach to the analysis of gift-exchange is one that introduces 'time' into the process of the giving and receiving of gifts. Time 'had the function of creating a screen between gift and counter-gift and allowing two perfectly symmetrical acts to appear as unique and unrelated acts' (Bourdieu 1998: 94). Individuals use 'time' and the delay between gift and counter-gift to maximise advantage or do 'what is right' in the circumstances. Time delay creates space between expectation and eventual outcome. The space is filled by uncertainty and hesitation rather than conscious or deliberate action. Time allows game-playing strategies to be introduced and these serve to obscure the objective reality of the exchange which is rendered possible only after its completion. Therefore for Bourdieu, the introduction of time is fundamental to his analysis of gift-exchange, with individuals' use of time crucial to the strategic sense, or game-playing that underlies 'gift-exchange'.

In a similar way, the introduction of 'time' is fundamental to the exchange between institution and parent. Time allows space for uncertainty and ambiguity as to the conclusion or the end of this particular student's educational story. The payment of fees is in return for something unarticulated and vaguely-defined. The relationship between parents and Grayshott Grammar is bound by the unspoken, but hoped-for desires from their financial investment. The institution



offers representations of success through the academic achievement, university destinations and future careers of its alumni. However, I am arguing that there is a space between the institutional representation and the result for individual students. That space is created firstly through an interval of time; a chronologically-defined time between joining and leaving the sixth-form. However, it is secondly a space of the imagination; a symbolically-defined imagination of their child's future. I argue therefore that it is *time* in conjunction with *imagination* that serves to disguise and suppress the economic transaction of fee-payment.

It is the ability of the institution to stimulate imaginations and fantasies of the future which is at the heart of the consumption of Grayshott's product. Bourdieu describes the 'taboo of making things explicit....thus exposing itself to making seem calculating and interested practices which are defined against calculation and interest' (1998:120). The relationship between parents and sixth-form is one based on an imagination of the future, which is at once narrowly-defined and elusive.

The consumption of symbolic capital operates on the tacit and implicit understandings created by Grayshott:

No-one is really unaware of the logic of exchange (it constantly surfaces in explicit form, when for example someone wonders whether a present will be judged sufficient), but no one fails to comply with the rule of the game which is to act as if one did not know the rule. We might coin the term 'common recognition' to designate this game in which everyone knows – and does not want to know- that everyone knows- and does not want to know – the true nature of the exchange (Bourdieu in Schrift: 1997:242)

The logic of the exchange between parent and sixth-form is one based on payment in return for a private education. However, there is rarely an articulated understanding of what that means. There is, I am arguing, an ill-defined space between the sixth-form's representation of its product and the parents' consumption of it. The 'common recognition' is that 'everyone knows' that the payment of fees comes with an expectation of 'something', but that 'something' is rarely made explicit. Furthermore, 'to act as if one did not know the rule' is for Grayshott Grammar, the suggestions of 'Oxbridge' or 'medicine'. These are intimations, hints, and sometimes real options for Grayshott Grammar students. But everyone knows, and does not want to know, that these are available only to a minority.

Research carried out into parental attitudes towards private education suggests that of course 'everyone knows'. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown's study was of parents' attitudes towards independent education within three institutions including Grayshott Grammar (2000). As part of their research project, parents of sixth-form students in Grayshott Grammar were surveyed as to the 'benefits of an independent sixth-form education'. The largest group of parents (from a total of 185 across the three institutions), identified that 'gaining academic qualifications to enter higher education and the professions' as their priority from an independent sixth-form. In Grayshott Grammar's celebration of its traditional A-level curriculum and the prominence of highly-competitive degree courses, it constructs an imagined future based on what 'everyone knows', yet there are no promises, nothing tangible or definite, just hints and suggestions of what might be.

The fulfilment of these promises becomes known over time, and for some the expectations are met, for others an illusion is shattered. The imagination and eventual conclusion of UCAS applications left one parent of a failed medical applicant confused and disappointed:

*I just don't know what more we could have done. He's predicted all 'A' grades, he got all A\*s at GCSE...loads of work experience...not one single offer..... I keep thinking we missed something....*

The 'something' this parent has missed is perhaps not in what she has done or not done for her child. Rather, it is in the innocent consumption of the sixth-form's symbolic capital, with its associations and implications of success. For her son to be accepted at medical school was at one time reasonable and expected, but now out of reach. The relationship ends with disappointment and disillusionment.

However, as illustrated through the extracts below, for some, the spell is broken much earlier, and their on-going consumption of Grayshott Grammar is peppered with cynicism.

One parent described her experience of the sixth-form:

*The parents here aren't earning London wages. Most of them, I'd say like me, are really struggling to find the fees. You're forever being asked to put your hand in your pocket. Everything's designed to make the school seem 'exclusive'.*

Another complained about 'the relentless promotion of Oxbridge' and how it was 'completely toe-curling' to sit through the UCAS evening. According to one father:

*the parents evening is such an act – he goes on about Oxbridge, Law and Medicine. That's just unrealistic for majority, but you're left feeling everyone here is in that league.*

Furthermore, the sixth-form's classification of university choices was not always something that sat comfortably with its staff. One long-serving member of the teaching staff complained that the headmaster put too much pressure on students and not enough emphasis on the student as an individual:

*He won't accept that new universities can be the right option for some of our kids. I don't know how he gets away with it. If I was head I would run things very differently.*

These extracts reveal the way that institution and individuals are not always engaged in straightforward relationships of capital accumulation. Cultural capital is sometimes imperfectly converted to symbolic capital, with parents who break 'the taboo of making things explicit...' (Bourdieu 1998:96). The institution's production and representation of symbolic capital is disrupted through individuals' challenging what is being offered. For one father, the taboo was broken in a moment of rare frankness, and at the end of a 'leavers' service and celebration'. With his son helping himself to one of the many unopened bottles of wine, the father shouted, 'go on, take it, I've just paid £20,000 for that bottle'.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has delved deep into the life of Grayshott Grammar. My intention has been to understand how it constructs its proximity to elite universities through the symbolic dimensions of class. I have argued that its ability to narrow A-level choice and create shared understandings of university destinations is through the conversion of cultural capital to something symbolically understood. The institution is in this way operating in the symbolic dimensions of class, and engaged in the process of defining what is legitimate. Indeed, the representation

of choices as legitimate or reasonable is central to its production of cultural capital. Further, I have described the informal and formal ways in which this cultural capital was converted. Symbolic capital is displayed through Grayshott Grammar's celebrations and displays of student success. It is reinforced too by the endorsement offered by the Oxbridge professor.

I have explored the relationship between institution and parents in order to show how Grayshott Grammar seeks to create a taste for certain types of university. However, I have argued that the transaction of fee-payment relies on the vague and illusory nature of the promise of an independent education. Furthermore, in drawing from the analogy of 'gift-exchange', I have argued that parents and institution practice and experience this in ways that rarely articulate or make explicit the nature of that exchange. Indeed, it is its very inexplicitness that jars with such practices being defined as exploitative. Nevertheless, there is little doubt as to the outcomes from their choice of private education, and we are once more captured within the difficult territory of intentions and outcomes. These issues will be picked up once again in chapter eight, when I focus on three mothers' accounts of choosing Grayshott Grammar.

I have argued that in parents choosing Grayshott Grammar they are engaged in a very specific classed practice, with above all, their choice a signal of their middle-classness to others. To be a parent at Grayshott Grammar is to become part of a middle-class environment, through its ostentatious displays of class coded culture. The correspondences between middle-class parents and sixth-form institution are evidenced through the subtle and not so subtle details of school routines. In the next chapter, I will consider how the minutia of school rules, its unspoken and formal structures are negotiated by three students who are newcomers to the private sector. All middle-class,

their experience of coming into contact with Grayshott Grammar reveals the emotional dimensions of class as mediated by 'habitus'.

## **Chapter 6: Entering the field – becoming privileged?**

### **Students' narratives of transition to Grayshott Grammar.**

#### **Introduction**

With its focus on habitus, this chapter explores the emotions of class as interpreted through a Bourdieuan framework. I draw on narrative data from the young people whose progress I followed during their two years at Grayshott Grammar. The nine are comprised of two groups: three young people who joined Grayshott Grammar from state secondary school and six who transferred to Grayshott Grammar's sixth-form from within its senior school.

The chapter's conceptual focus is on habitus, and the narratives it draws on articulate and exposes the strengths and limitations of its use as a tool for research. As I discussed in chapter three, the theoretical potential offered by habitus is not matched by its practical application. Above all, the narratives in this chapter confirmed the difficulty of exposing the habitus of those who articulate a seemingly natural alignment to the field. In the previous chapter, I had discussed how Grayshott Grammar created doxic understandings of A-level study and university participation, and that when individuals and institution are in harmony, it is difficult to pierce through the many layers of accumulated inculcation. Indeed, all that had become taken for granted, unspoken and accepted was concealed, only to be revealed at key moments of frustration or disappointment. Now, in this chapter, the very normal and everyday adjustment of habitus to field is so natural as to be almost beyond articulation.

I have argued throughout this thesis that habitus cannot be understood in isolation from field, and furthermore, that movement within the field is a particular time in which we see the potential and possibilities for change. Entry to a new part of the field brings habitus most clearly into view. I explore their responses and consider how their cultural capital positions them in relation to the institution's dominant capital. As I will discuss below, the students' articulations of how they settle into Grayshott Grammar provide insights as to the classed subjectivities which are part and parcel of their middle-class habitus.

Thus, it is the aim of this chapter to focus attention on those moments, and how through that trajectory, habitus is revealed. My emphasis now is therefore on the narratives of three students from the group of nine who are newcomers to the field. Educated previously in state secondary schools, their narratives articulate the responses of those entering a new place in the field, questioning its principles and practices. The young people's accounts illustrate an attempted reconciliation of habitus and field, which unlike the easy correspondence between the middle-class and education implied in the classed practices literature, is far from harmonious. Indeed, from the interplay between habitus and field surfaces an educational trajectory which is considerably more complicated than its usual depiction. Thus, through following the journeys of these young people, this chapter contributes to the concern of the thesis to deconstruct the assumed homogeneity of the middle classes as represented through classed practices research and explore the consequences of this for taking this research forward.

The chapter is therefore an attempt to include the middle-class young people whose stories have been reduced to symbols of their parents' educational interventions or as a background against which to explore working-class disadvantage. Their stories offer a challenge to dominant assumptions of middle-class educational practices as characterised by



security and self-confidence. Furthermore, as students within a fee-paying institution, the young people discussed here enable us to deconstruct the commonly asserted 'double privilege' of social class and private school. The intention is to move beyond stereotypical representations of privately-educated students in the classed practices literature, and whose educational journeys are so natural and easy to be barely worthy of attention. I will argue that far from their relationship being one epitomized by effortless familiarity, the stories of these young people are about an altogether more complex negotiation. As such they disrupt dominant assumptions and encourage us to look beyond the sterile labels of class towards the complex emotions generated by habitus.

### **The students**

The three new students are labelled as middle-class, with parental occupations designating them as such: Pam's single parent mother (healthcare adviser), Louise's father (small business manager), and Stephen's parents as teacher and social worker, place them within the wide-ranging domain of the middle-class. However, as I have already argued, and will discuss further here in this chapter, these are crude classifications which tell us little more than their parents being *other* than working class or in working class occupations. The six continuing students are also classified as middle-class through their parents' occupations. Felicity has been at Grayshott since year 7, her mother is a secretary and her father a naval officer. Michael has been at Grayshott since junior school, and his parents have occupations as clergyman and teacher. James joined Grayshott in year 7, and his parents are doctors. Ruth joined Grayshott in year 7, and her father is a lawyer and her mother a student. Kate joined Grayshott in year 9. Her mother is a secretary and her father an engineer. Finally, Tom,

who joined in year 9, has a father who is a chemical engineer and mother who is a psychologist.

### **Using habitus to think outside of the class box(es)**

As discussed in chapter one, Bourdieu's conceptual trilogy of habitus, capital and field has been a vehicle to reintroduce 'class' to the sociological agenda. The notion of 'classed practices' has become an important strand of educational research and one which takes us beyond class as boxes in which to position people. Particularly, the notion of 'habitus' has caught the imagination, with its potential to capture the emotional and subjective dimensions of class. However, as I concluded in chapter three, habitus presents a challenge for empirical research. As much as it is fashionable and widely-used within the sociology of education, evidence of its practical use is scant. (However, Hodgkinson, Reay etc in Grenfell and James (eds 1998) provide some examples). Bourdieu offered habitus as a 'thinking tool', rather than a prescription for research methods. Consequently, its definition and application enjoys a mercury-like quality in its ability to change shape and form throughout its appearance in the texts. The wide and diverse nature of its application is indicative of its attractiveness, but evidence too of its weakness. The tendency of its conceptual potential to be reduced to a linguistic tag was acknowledged in chapter three, and consequently my own interpretation of habitus adopts a formulation which I could *work with*, rather than *refer to*. Instead of searching for a set of rules to follow, its very fluidity is to be embraced as a means to carry out a more subtle analysis of how class is lived and experienced.

The definition I set out in chapter three was an attempt to make habitus do useful work for my own study, and I concluded that habitus was an individual's embodiment of cultural capital, and specifically for the

purposes of this research, its deployment within the educational field. The definition comprised the following components:

Confidence and knowledge of the academic system, its hierarchies, marks of status, processes and structures;

Ability to understand the informal, unspoken rules;

Relationships with teachers;

Imagination of the future; and

Boundary setting within the university application process.

Whilst in chapter seven, I discuss how habitus comes into view as students describe their imagined futures and in their setting of university choice boundaries, in this chapter it is revealed through their response to the new school environment, its rules and people.

Working with habitus, capital and field embraces all that is denied us by class labels. Bourdieu's concepts render a more subtle and complex understanding of class, shedding light on what is otherwise obscured. Therefore we turn to classed practices literature as providing the depth and detail to accompany, and arguably complete, the picture sketched out through large-scale quantitative research. Claims for a classed practices perspective are made on the basis of producing rich understandings and insights. Nevertheless, the tendency of classed practices literature is to provide a distorted, partial story of young people's educational practices. Its focus, when addressing middle-class students, is their university destinations, rather than their educational trajectories as more broadly-defined. At worst this reduces the young people to one-dimensional caricatures of privilege, at best it renders

them invisible. Above all, it has the effect of skirting around the messy space of the emotions. So, in the young people's stories described here is an attempt to deconstruct their educational subjectivities, and with an emphasis on the journey rather than the destination. Their university choices are discussed in the next chapter, and that they have the advantages to help them on their way is not disputed. However, their success is not inevitable and it is not without conflict or anxiety.

As I will discuss below, the students' narratives articulate classed responses to what I have described in chapter five as Grayshott Grammar's class-coded culture. Classed subjectivities emerge from narratives of discomfort and embarrassment as the students negotiate its rules and traditions. The young people articulate the uncertainty and anxiety of newcomers, and it is this 'distance' or 'critical eye' which offers insights as far as what is normally taken-for-granted in the institutional doxa. The narratives shed light on the life of the school beyond its public and official representation as conveyed through its glossy prospectus and web-pages. The young people provide us with a glimpse of life inside the archway which they walk beneath every day.

The concept of habitus stands in contrast to the interest in identity work in much educational research (Coffey: 2001). Unlike the emphasis on how individuals shape their identity, habitus fastens the subject more firmly to social structures. Using the concept of habitus, I will explore how identities are set within classed boundaries, and furthermore, how individuals' habitus equips them to negotiate the rules of each particular field. However, if habitus provides a counter to the cut and paste work of identity construction, the concept is viewed by some as reducing individual actions to their structural positions. As Diane Reay observes, (habitus) 'is probably Bourdieu's most contested concept', and has been criticized for its 'latent determinism...' (2005: p22). Unlike those who dismiss habitus as reducing action to structure, and emphasising the

reproductive rather than transformative nature of Bourdieu's concept, I understand habitus as encompassing the possibility for change, with as I argued in chapter one, the concept offering *possibilities* and *potentials* rather than fixed certainties. As I will discuss through the extracts below, read through the lens of habitus, the students' accounts capture the tension between continuity and change. Theirs are stories of fitting in but without necessarily belonging, moving on without losing sight of the past. Before turning to the narratives of the newcomers, let me first discuss how, for their colleagues, the field has become infused into their habitus.

### **Habitus – hidden beneath the weight of doxa**

The following extracts, which are taken from interviews with the six students who continued through to the sixth-form, exemplify the way in which habitus and field are almost imperceptibly joined together.

I asked Michael about how he would describe the sixth-form's rules:

I'm sure it's pretty much the same here as anywhere else. No worse than what I hear from friends. In fact I think it's pretty relaxed really and anyway people are motivated and so I don't think they see much need for heavy rules.

In a similar vein, James told me that:

I think they treat us like adults, you know, first names make a difference. I expect you've heard that a few people left for (Winterbourne), and I know they would disagree....but I'm really happy to stay here.

When I asked Felicity to describe a 'typical Grayshott student', her articulation contrasted quite markedly with the responses offered by the three newcomers, and which are described further below. For Felicity, the question was puzzling, and her answer suggested to me that had never thought about Grayshott as a particular type of educational establishment, but simply as the school she had attended for her secondary education:

I am not sure if this is what you mean, but, well I can't say I've ever seen people here as 'typical'.... There's people I get on with better than others, but I think that's the same, you know, for most people...probably more to do with personality, you know for example if someone has a strong personality or whatever.

For Tom, the question prompted him to categorise students in the following way:

I think there are some geekier people, and some who don't mix, but really, you know, the majority are sociable and get along together very well. Well, I suppose you do have a big group, and I would say I am in that group. It's just like people who are....well, normal, like doing normal things, going to Starbucks.

The theme of 'being normal' was a common thread within the narratives of the six students who had transferred to the sixth-form from within Grayshott Grammar. Their experiences and responses to their environment were so natural as to be almost beyond articulation, and certainly my questions were met with some surprise. However, their initial difficulties in responding and the very ordinary narratives that were provided can be understood as accounts of a perfect alignment of habitus and field. Above, all their responses conveyed the limitations of using Bourdieu's tools empirically, and the particular inadequacies of habitus. The remainder of this chapter therefore discusses how I put Bourdieu's tools into practice, and how the narratives of the three

newcomers offered the perspective on Grayshott Grammar that could only be seen through the eyes of those who had yet to accept its doxa.

### **Putting Bourdieu into practice**

The two young women and one young man were interviewed during the autumn and summer terms of their first academic year, and then again during their second year at Grayshott Grammar. The first interview followed Wengraf's (2006) biographic narrative technique, with the use of a single question designed to induce a narrative response: 'How come you are at this sixth form, studying these particular A- levels?' Second interviews picked up on what had been said in response, and this was followed in subsequent interviews by a teasing out of the themes that had emerged. Using NVivo to analyse the data for themes and categories, I explored the ideas in greater depth, following lines of enquiry as they were raised by the participants.

As discussed in chapter three, my aim was to avoid collecting sanitised accounts, and I wanted to understand the young people's experiences as close as possible to the time they happened. A narrative response provided a way to understand how the students made sense of their move to Grayshott Grammar. Furthermore, the narratives enabled me to explore the extent to which the habitus of these young people was congruent or dissonant with the class-coded culture of Grayshott Grammar that I described in chapter five.

The narratives illustrate how the transition from state secondary school to independent sixth-form can be read both as a straightforward change of schools, but also as journeys through social space. I will first explore the students' evaluation of the move to Grayshott Grammar, looking at their reasons for joining and their responses to the process of transition. I will look not only at their anticipations and hopes, but how the young

people articulate the expectations of their parents. I will then discuss how these young people see themselves in relation to other students as they negotiate the field, navigate its spaces, and challenge its rules.

Let me now trace the main narrative themes.

### **Leaving me behind?**

For the middle-class young women about to join Grayshott Grammar, their first impressions and imagination were characterised by awe and some degree of fearfulness. Although neither had moved more than 5 miles to join the sixth-form, its depiction was as an unfamiliar and remote place. Despite being positioned within a city with which the young women were familiar, the institution was far removed from their ordinary experience. The remote, almost exotic nature of Grayshott Grammar emerged as common narrative themes. So, on the one hand the young women's explanations were of straightforward accounts of moving schools. On the other hand, and what was striking about their narratives, was the transfer as about far more than a change of institution. The move had produced a deeply personal and emotional response. Grayshott Grammar had come to represent a more comprehensive break from the past and everything they had taken for granted. For example, Pam described what led her to move away from her previous school.

*And I just started like drinking quite a lot and everyone was doing drugs and that sort of thing. And I just thought I didn't want to be there any more and like I wanted to be organised again, and enjoy school. I didn't want to go to school, but I used to enjoy school before and my attitude had changed so much. I just*



*partied all the time. I applied to this school because my best friend wanted to come here, but she actually didn't get in.*  
(Laughs).

The decision to join Grayshott Grammar is attributed to very personal troubles and concerns about the way Pam saw her life was heading.

Certainly not a planned process, the application was made almost by chance. Unlike the characterisation of middle-class decisions as strategic and carefully-considered, Pam's story is of more fragmented and haphazard decision-making. Because of a friend's interest in the sixth-form, Pam thought 'it would be worth a day off school to keep her company'. The friend, who ultimately failed to receive a place, provided the interest in what Pam told me had been previously 'unthinkable', at least by her, and not something she had discussed with her mother at home. Thus, as I discussed in chapter three, the collection of narrative data retains the real-life twists and turns of fate, which otherwise risk becoming ironed out by the more traditional questions and answers, and which create the illusion of straightforward and inevitable decisions.

Reading the narrative through the lens of habitus, Pam's story reveals how class is culturally and symbolically constructed. Following feminists who have incorporated gender into Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Skeggs: 1997; 2005; Lawler 1999; Reay 1998, 2003, 2004, 2005), we can see how gender and class combine to produce a fragile subjectivity, and in Pam's story there is a persistent concern with being judged as different, and perhaps unworthy of the new environment. That such feelings surface within a middle-class young woman asks us to reconsider the way in which gender and class work together. In contrast to the usual emphasis placed on working-class women's lack of confidence and fear of being judged as lacking, the narrative brings about similar emotions for this middle-class young woman. The move

to the independent sector has encouraged Pam to question her behaviour and everything she had previously taken for granted. The narrative is imbued with a sense of having left something of the old self behind in order to become worthy of the privilege she associates with the new school.

*When I came here it felt....it felt, it just felt right... yeah, and you just could imagine, I could imagine myself here. And it was like... something I could be proud of myself again.....and I thought this is a new start, I can change. I still find it difficult to keep up with the work, but I feel I have definitely made progress. (Pam)*

The narrative is difficult to read as congruent with the representations of middle-class self-assurance and entitlement. It does not resonate with the assertion that middle-class students occupy comfortable and coherent educational subjectivities. By joining the sixth-form, she imagines a chance to have a fresh start. There is a sense of her blaming herself, but blaming her friends too.

In similar vein, Louise says:

*When I went to High School for the first couple of years I was like getting down working and then, cos I was just producing As and stuff, I stopped working. I started going out more....every night and most weekends. That's why I was upset with my results and that's why I came here. This is..um like an amazing school and you pretty much get your first choice of Uni if you put the work in. I knew that I wouldn't get good A-level grades if I stayed with my old friends. They want a social life first, and work comes second. I want to be successful and hopefully I've turned a corner.*

Running through both young women's accounts are themes of embarrassment and regret as they articulate painful memories of life before the sixth-form. Instead of reflecting on past behaviour as a stage in their growing up, the emphasis on social life, which for one, included recreational drug taking, is perceived as an individual, shameful failing which will be 'cured' by moving schools. The new sixth-form is seen to offer an escape from a past life that is recounted with awkwardness and discomfort. What is prominent in both young women's stories is the narrators' evaluation of the move as somehow offering protection; a fresh start, and a haven from previous temptations. The young women articulate their educational future as predicated on leaving a part of themselves behind.

Whereas Skeggs and Reay work with Bourdieu to illustrate the way that gender and class combine to produce stigmatized working class identities for the women in their own research, Pam and Louise provide examples of the more finely-drawn boundaries and judgement-making that takes place within and between classes. The move to Grayshott Grammar can be seen as disrupting ordinary and taken-for-granted behaviours and dispositions. These early interviews are moments when the coming together of habitus and field reveals the first tensions and contradictions as the young women encounter their new school. However, and as I will explore below, the young women's later interviews reveal their continued attempts to become a part of the institution. Their narratives raises questions as to the nature of habitus as, on the one hand, durable and resilient to transformation, or as a more flexible, adaptable concept that is responsive to different fields.

The degree of alignment between the young women's habitus and the educational field may be described in terms of the students' 'feel for the game', and the extent to which the transition represents continuity or disruption of the practices and routines of everyday life. Poor alignment

between habitus and field is not always limited to stark differences as represented through binaries of class. Rather, it captures the more subtle degrees of divergence, for example, in the students' perceptions of themselves in relation to the school's representation of class-coded culture. To become a part of the new culture is however not as straightforward as buying a new uniform. For example, the young women describe very quickly learning how female students add further layers of interpretation to the school's dress code, with Louise telling me:

*I have toned it down a bit! There's no rule about make-up when you get to sixth-form....but I guess there is a sense that you don't want to stand out too much.*

And Pam says:

*I like the uniform....yes, it's smart and I feel quite grown up in it.*

*Gayna (Do people customize the uniform?)*

*Well...not really.... I suppose it's different once we're outside the arch (the school entrance), but the Head is really, really strict about uniform.....and like there's this thing about not wearing patterned tights, and not wearing heels above 2 inches...*

Although Pam and Louise told me they made rapid changes to their make-up and dress, both described greater difficulty in considering themselves as part of the student body. The early months were characterised by feeling alien to the rituals and ceremonies of school life. Louise said:

*I do find some of the rules a bit pedantic here. Like before, there weren't any rules, well I suppose there were rules... but here you're not allowed to carry your bag around with you. I got told off once for that. You can't have your jumper hanging below your jacket. If you're even two minutes late they go ballistic. At my old school people would stroll in 15 minutes late and no-one would even ask you where you'd been. I'm learning those rules now though. (Louise)*

And Pam explains:

*I found tutor time a bit embarrassing at first. We all have to take turns of bringing food in to share with our tutor group, and form tutor. We sort of sit around eating cakes and chatting about all kinds of stuff....it's a bit sort of ....false, and I sit there thinking say something! I was surprised how the rest of the group were arguing with the tutor, well really taking the piss you could say!*

The transition to private sixth-form is represented through the young women's encountering the informal and formal routines of a very different culture to what they experienced before. Pam found herself standing back from the weekly 'tutor time', which made her uncomfortable and unable to participate. The 'tutor time' was an intimate and intense part of the school routine that highlighted Pam's unease and lack of confidence. Her account of reticence and awkwardness is one more commonly associated with working-class student's inability to read the informal rules of school life. If in Pam's description of her initial embarrassment there is an implication that her initial discomfort eased as she became more familiar with the routine, her sense of awkwardness presents itself as a recurrent theme. As I will discuss further below, for Pam the central narrative theme is one of her on the periphery as she resists Grayshott Grammar's dominant culture.

Like Pam, Louise's early response to the sixth-form is cautious and faltering. She describes the rules as 'a bit pedantic', however this does not lessen her desire to comply with them. Louise's narrative projects her mixture of awe, disbelief and excitement bound up in her early weeks of sixth-form life. The focus of her early concerns is not on the demands of her A-level courses, but instead the 'tiny things' that she is struggling to learn about, rules and unspoken codes of behaviour that she perceives as important hurdles to overcome.

...I know it sounds really weird to say it, but they have like respect for the school and stuff.....like even really, really tiny things...in assembly we have to stand up when the Headmaster comes in. It's like that would never happen in my old school (laughing), never in a million years! No one talks in prep - that would never happen! And just like, it's when we all went to the Cathedral and we all had to sing ...in like the first week.

The twice-termly Cathedral service and daily assembly are opportunities for the sixth-form to display its dominant symbolic capital. It is through these rituals and practices that students become inculcated with the institutionally-valued capital. For example, the symbolic conversion of cultural capital is produced by the headmaster's celebration of sporting or musical achievement. As I will discuss below, these are occasions when the values and interests of the institution are embedded into the fabric of the day-to-day life. Indeed these are times that come to represent what is valued and what is expected of its students. For Louise, the goal now is to acquire capital of which, until now, she has been oblivious.

## Becoming la-di-dah?

Continuity or disruption of the young women's habitus can be seen through attempts to maintain or leave behind former friends.

Friendship was on the one hand an emblem of the past, with for Louise, the ending of previous relationships important to her future. On the other hand, for Pam, the future was bound up with the past, with her narrative capturing an on-going struggle to reconcile old and new friends. The young women's narratives offered insights into the extent to which the move to Grayshott Grammar necessitated a renegotiation of friendships, and most revealingly perhaps, how they were seen by former friends. Pam said she knew that her friends saw the school as very snobbish, and although she described maintaining friendships, when I first met her, she emphasised the extremely painful nature of the transition:

*They say 'how's your private, genius school. Have you got new stuck up bitches for friends?*

At our first meetings in November and April, Pam told me that she had found it hard juggling her two groups of friends. She said she had struggled to fit in, and didn't have the same sense of effortless friendship with fellow students as she had with her group from outside Grayshott Grammar. At our first meeting she described feeling more 'at ease' with her old friends, nevertheless trying very hard to break into new friendship groups. When we met nine months later, the theme of friendship was still important for her, and she continued to talk about being pulled in two directions, although she told me about progress made.

*I've been invited to a couple of girls' houses after school. I have got some friends here, but I feel more at ease with the old crowd.*

*I still spend my weekends with them mainly, although I did try to bring both groups together....so they could, you know, get on... but it wasn't really .... It didn't sort of work.*

When we next met in November, some 15 months after her joining the sixth-form, Pam described how she had by this time made some very close friends, and also how she had finally achieved a balance between old and new friends:

*I actually have a good group.... five of us are all really good friends. Two are new to the sixth-form, but the others have been here since year 7, and um....they're just, they're just normal really. They're like how I see the friends from my old school. I still see the old friends as well, but I find I've got the balance right now. Yeah, things are a lot better now. We went to the rock festival together, and camped out together. My best girl friend from home is now really good friends with us too, and so it's all fine.*

Pam's story raises important questions about the nature of change, and particularly, the extent to which she can retain elements of her former life outside of school. For Pam, the move to an independent sixth-form had necessitated the balancing of past and present social networks. The maintenance of friends and a social life outside of her school activities had been a focus of our discussions on each of the occasions we met during her first academic year. Pam had described feeling out of place and not fitting in with her classmates. However, at the beginning of the second year, I revisited this topic, asking her whether it was still possible to pick out the students who had been long-term members of the school from the few who had joined the previous year.

*No, not really, not any more. I think I was quite prejudiced before. I thought they were all right snobs. I think it's just that I've eased*



*into the environment now and where I like... see them everyday, they're now just a part of everyday life, so I don't feel any different to them.*

Initially, at least, Pam regarded her fellow students as 'snobs', with no differentiation or subtlety in her perception. In the early months at Grayshott, Pam saw the other students as a homogeneous mass of elite 'others', with nothing to distinguish themselves. After just over a year, she described having made some good friendships. Pam had eventually found a place for herself within the new sixth-form. What is more, she was able to reconcile old and new friendships, blurring what were the once hard boundaries inside and outside of the arch. Her account illustrates the way in which the binaries of middle-class and working class are insufficient to capture the subtleties and complexities offered by habitus. Indeed, through the interplay of habitus and field we can see how individuals are positioned in relation to each other, and with those relative similarities and differences not fixed once and for all. Rather, the habitus is receptive to change as individuals are inculcated with the dominant capital of the field, and as they come to accept what was previously strange.

Similarly, for Louise, the sixth-form is initially seen as foreign territory, populated by distant and unknown others. She articulates a sense of standing on the edge, observing from afar. However, unlike Pam, for Louise, the transition is seen as 'no way back' to her former social life. She does not challenge her friends' labelling of the school as 'posh', and she says she understands why they tease her about 'becoming la-di-dah'. Louise says her friends are accurate in their description of the girls as 'naïve', and the boys as 'arrogant'. Although Louise described feeling embarrassed about her friends' attitudes towards her new school, she appeared to accept this as a price to pay for her 'opportunity'. Unlike Pam, she described being less interested in keeping previous

friendships, and told me she had formed some close relationships when we met two months into the first year

If the young women's narratives placed emphasis on the emotional experience of joining their new sixth-form, and as challenging their identity and friendships, then Stephen's narrative offers a contrasting perspective.

His narrative is at first detached and rationalised:

*I knew I would get a better education here. In fact, I think this is the best education of my life so far. I really enjoy being here and I have found my friends easier to relate to than my previous school. The teachers are so much better, and I know that this is a more professional school. I suppose I don't get on with everyone, (laughs) but then it would be a strange world if you did. I guess the only down side is the uniform. I don't see why they need to treat you like school children. If I was at a college now then I could come and go as I like and wear what I want. They do tend to spoonfeed you here and you feel like you're at a school rather than a college.*

However, despite these mainly positive reflections, the first month was blighted by academic struggle and family conflict. Stephen felt unable to continue with his science A-levels:

*The others had got A\*s in their GCSEs and I couldn't keep up....I hadn't done what they had. But I knew that if I had done my GCSEs here, I would be up to the same standard. Their teaching had been so much more professional. I'm not saying they had been spoonfed, but they were not allowed to slack, and at my old*

*school the teachers were no way as good. I know I would have got A\*s if I had been here.*

*Anyway I was getting quite depressed about it all, and so after about a week, I saw Miss Parker about changing the physics and chemistry for English and history. My parents weren't happy about me wanting to change. They were putting all sorts of pressure on me. They threatened to move me to a state FE college. The pressure was huge. Luckily Miss Parker gave them more of an insight into how it is here. I think my parents realised I was getting quite depressed about it all. They say I can stay here if I work hard.*

When I interviewed Stephen again towards the end of his first term, the change of school was seen as overwhelmingly positive, having enabled him to develop new confidence:

*The friends I'm making now....they'll be with me for the rest of my life...you know, people who you can call on when you need help. I've met so many different people, and there's no-one I'd say I don't get on with....not like my old school where people would judge the way I talked or the things I said. No, here, I've made the best friends and I think these two years will be the most important in my life.*

Far from positioning himself as an observer standing on the periphery, Stephen appears to hurl himself into school life. According to the Headteacher, he had already established himself as something of a 'character'.

Again, this narrative raises questions about the nature of habitus as a fixed or changeable concept. For Stephen, the new environment is embraced fully, and he describes throwing himself into the life of the school. He talks about feeling at ease with the teachers, and he is sufficiently confident to draw on their support when he encounters problems with his choice of A-levels. Stephen brings cultural capital to the new environment which supports his transition and enables him to quickly thrive. At a time of crisis, his ease of communication and ability to navigate the institution enable him to secure the necessary guidance and support.

For Stephen, the school offers a resource to be exploited to his advantage. The new environment allows him to be *himself*, his real, authentic self. This is, he argues, an identity that was difficult to project in his previous environment. He told me he is no longer teased about his accent or 'eccentricities':

*I used to be picked on a bit, not bullied as such, but people would laugh at my accent and make fun....um... of the way I always asked teachers questions in class. They used to tease me about not being very sporty too. I got quite depressed about everything, and so I'm glad to be here.*

The move to Grayshott Grammar is presented as an opportunity for Stephen to act 'naturally' and without fear of bullying. The new environment is seen as offering a break from the past, and for new friendships to be formed with those whom he sees as more sympathetic peers.

### **Hopes and expectations of a private education**

Common to all three narratives was a very clearly articulated perception of their parents' expectations of them. In contrast to the middle-class families' commonly asserted familiarity and strong history of educational success, for both Pam and Louise, there was no such family tradition. The transition to the independent school was seen as a 'second chance', for themselves, and a first opportunity within their families. The young women had no family history of attending higher education, and neither had parental experience of the independent school system. Louise described her mother as 'having a really poor background', and 'not having had an education past 16'. Pam explained that her mother had been a single parent for the past 15 years, and 'held down three jobs to pay the mortgage'. Describing a childhood of being left with 'aunties' and 'friends' while her mother worked, Pam told me that she was determined to 'give something back' to her mother.

Unlike the young women's more implicit and subjective understanding of the expectations placed on them, for Stephen, the move to an independent sixth-form was discussed in terms of an investment. Stephen told me he was determined to embrace what the school was seen to offer, both now, and in the future he imagined beyond university. For Stephen, the move to Grayshott Grammar was filled with opportunities and benefits that he was determined to grasp. His parents had told him they would pay for fees because they had become more confident he would benefit from the private school system. He told me a bargain had been struck: they would invest in his education, and he would enter a career they saw as offering an appropriate return. However, after just two weeks in the sixth-form, when Stephen realised his choice of A-level subjects had been a mistake, he was unable to fulfil his parents' wish of following a scientific or medical career path.

*So we eventually came to an agreement....but my parents were saying like as a joke, 'if you can't do well in these subjects then*

*we're going to take you out, because you're just pissing about'. And so, they um, they um, I actually...they actually had a talk with me and a big discussion, and eventually we came to the conclusion of me changing from Biology and Chemistry to History and English, which is totally different.*

For Stephen, his move to the sixth-form was originally conditional on his parents' very explicit career plans for him. The themes of 'privilege' and 'advantage' were frequently articulated, and after resolving the early problem with his A level choices, he seemed to have no doubts about the transition to sixth-form. Only with intervention from the deputy head, were his parents persuaded that a change of subjects and a future career in law rather than science would better take into account their son's strengths in humanities. Stephen was clear that his parents were not prepared to 'throw good money after bad' if he did not deliver high grades in his new subject choices. With the intervention of a senior member of staff, Stephen persuaded his parents that studying English and history would remove the pressure and enable him to continue his A level studies. The early hiccup was resolved.

This section has explored the way that the three young people have described the transition to independent sixth-form. I have worked with narrative data in order to discuss their evaluation of the process of changing school, and their initial responses to it. For the young women, the negotiation of friendships can be understood as a metaphor of change. The move to Grayshott Grammar requires a change of self, and a renegotiation of friendships. Furthermore, both young women's narratives may be read as necessitating the creation of a new educational subjectivity. The new environment was challenging and at times overwhelming. In contrast, for Stephen, rather than any hint of unease, the transition is presented with greater emphasis on the academic rewards of his new educational environment. His early hiccup

with A-level subjects is soon remedied and the challenge for him is described in terms of keeping up with the work.

In the following section I will look at how the new students perceive themselves in relation to other students. As I have argued in chapter three, by anchoring cultural capital to habitus offers a means to take hold of what is on its own a too slippery and ethereal notion. The discussion below looks at the students' responses to the sixth-form's dominant representations of cultural capital. Their narratives reveal the extent to which their existing cultural capital works in correspondence with the field. Furthermore, it enables us to look more closely at how the newcomers position themselves within the field through their responses to those around them.

### **A typical private school student?**

To gain an insight into the young people's perceptions of themselves in relation to other students at Grayshott Grammar, I asked whether it was possible to describe a typical Grayshott student. The responses were unequivocal and affirmative, and their ability to sketch out a typical or average student was indicative of the strength and pervasiveness of the institution's dominant capital. The descriptions provided me with an insight as to the young people's subjective response to their environment. More than that, their profiling of the so-called 'average' student represented a point of contrast and comparison with themselves. As such, their accounts serve to problematise the notion of a uniform middle-class. Further, their narratives open up a space between their own and the institutional representations of capital. As I will discuss below, the portrait can be interpreted as a model or embodiment of what is institutionally-valued capital.

This is conveyed through Pam's understanding:

*They expect everyone to be a '10'.*

*Gayna (Can you tell me a little more about that?)*

*Excelling at everything, sport, music, grades...The Headmaster goes on about all this stuff...every assembly.....it's always Saturday match results, tours to this place and that, how we're top of this league... and I end up thinking what about those who just want to go out with friends at the weekend?*

Pam is aware that there is a dominant culture, which she can identify through the messages given at school assemblies and in school newsletters. However, nine months into the school she resists the rules of this particular game, the 'doxa' which is the collective understanding of what is and what is not 'done' or the things that are said or not said, valued or not valued, within the institution.

When I meet Pam during her second year at the school, she described a change in attitude towards the school's academic expectations:

*I've sort of turned a corner as far as work's concerned. Last year was almost wasted, and I only got predicted BBB. I was disappointed with that, and since the summer I've put a lot more time in. I realise that you only get one crack at this!*

Although Pam's narrative of joining the sixth-form talked about a 'fresh start', her first year has seen her resist pressure to spend time on homework. There is still some distance between what Pam sees as a reasonable amount of time to spend studying, and what she knows the school expects. Nevertheless, there is a growing academic confidence



and she tells me she is determined to prove her tutors wrong, and turn her predicted BBB grades into the AAB she has been told her first choice university will demand.

For Stephen, the notion of an average student is again someone whose cultural capital echoes with that valued by Grayshott Grammar. The institutional emphasis on sport and music is clearly understood by Stephen, and nevertheless gives him a sense of not quite fitting the model:

*Look at me (laughs), you can see I'm the sporty type, not! I sometimes think that they want you to be like...this amazing all rounder. It's true what they say about the school. They are arrogant here, and unless you're amazing at everything you're a nobody.*

Stephen's perception of the institution's expectations of its students sits uncomfortably with his own identity as neither 'sporty' or 'amazing at everything'. If he has embraced the school's social network, and believes himself to be privileged in attending this institution, he also positions himself in relation to the 'all rounders' who possess the cultural capital the school espouses.

For Louise, too there is a clear perception of what is valued by the institution. For example, she wants to continue a part-time job at weekends, and tells me how her tutor discourages this:

*She said I'd need to write to the Headmaster and ask his permission....apparently he's not too keen on us working in the holidays either, but weekends are completely out, she said.*

The headmaster gives a powerful and negative message about part-time work. When I asked him about the institution's approach to part-time working he said he expected tutors to oppose such requests, but if a student was persistent to ask them to write formally to him. The headmaster told me that he had collected extensive data on the correlation between poor A-level grades and part-time working. I was left in no doubt as to Grayshott Grammar's objection to part-time working, and one interpretation of the negative value attributed to paid work is the institution's pragmatic approach to the demands of A-level study. However, in contrasting the stance on paid work with the emphasis on week-end sporting activities, drama and musical practice, we can see the way in which time spent outside of the academic timetable is coded in relation to the symbolically-defined culture of the institution. High value is placed on activities that are congruent with Grayshott's dominant cultural capital.

Furthermore, class is embedded and implicit in the institution's valuing of certain activities over others. It is implicit in the assumptions made about students' ability to give time to musical and sporting pursuits. The financial cost associated with spending time on these activities, and *not* carrying out paid work is taken-for-granted, unacknowledged and expected. Moreover, the emphasis on students devoting time to non-paid activities can be seen as obscuring the financial costs of such pastimes. For example, expensive musical tuition or the costs associated with travel to sporting fixtures. The Bourdieuan notion of classed tastes as reflecting 'distance from necessity' is brought to mind here. Economic constraints are disguised and displaced by cultural choices. Taste is given the appearance of personal decision-making, where in reality it incorporates financial considerations. Activities are coded as either good and worthy uses of time, or as being in conflict with the institution's values.

Grayshott Grammar's preoccupation with sport and musical achievements reflects an institutionally-understood hierarchy of non-academic activities. The emphasis on particular sports, especially rugby and cricket, and the prominence given to music and drama are resonant with the cultural norms of what Reay describes as the established middle-class. The institution represents such activities as part and parcel of school life. They are prominent in the school day and celebrated through the institution's many and varied ways of displaying success. With the emphasis given in the newsletters sent to families, the prospectus and web-based material, Stephen's insightful notion of the 'amazing all-rounder' is vividly depicted. Furthermore, these are images which are evocative of my first conversation with Grayshott Grammar's headmaster:

*When I joined (Grayshott) I was very aware of how we were seen in the city...an academic hothouse and not much else really....I wanted us to be far more....to emphasise the child's happiness first and academic success second.*

The headmaster's stated aspiration is in many ways a contradiction to the carefully controlled approach to students' academic choices discussed in chapters four and five. However, it is evocative also of the way in which the institutional construction of symbolic capital was achieved. The emphasis on sport, music and drama coalesce with the notion of the 'child's happiness', and at the same time serve to deflect and divert attention from the financial transactions which lie beneath the relationship between parent and institution.

However, what is accomplished and represented through the institutional inculcation of its quite distinctive cultural capital is not necessarily indicative of students' common experience at Grayshott. Stephen, Pam and Louise can certainly identify Grayshott's supposedly

'average' student through the cultural capital that is valued by the institution. Nevertheless, whether such a student is really 'typical' of the sixth-form's intake is less clear. Contrary to the perception of the three newcomers of the school being populated by 'amazing all-rounders', these students were, according to one senior and long-serving teacher, a minority. In opposition to the aspirations of the headmaster and the perceptions of the students, he told me that 'most of the parents here are struggling just to pay the fees every term, let alone getting sucked into all that nonsense'. What remains unsaid is that these are pastimes open to those whose families have the economic capital to pay for such 'extras'. As I discussed in chapter five, beneath the glossy brochures and public displays, there is dissonance and conflict. These moments of dissension threaten to expose the economic capital on which the institution and its parents rely upon.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has explored how habitus can be used to understand continuity and change through the eyes of nine young people whose sixth-form years were spent at Grayshott Grammar. For those students who transferred to the sixth-form from within Grayshott's senior school, their narratives communicated the ordinary and normal experience of life within an environment that was so familiar. Their experience of the sixth-form was one of continuity, and as such, they struggled to reflect on my questions. Above all, the narratives were characterised by an alignment of habitus and field, as conveyed through accounts of unquestioning acceptance of their environment. I failed to pierce through that veneer, to break with the doxic experience. Thus in order to expose what had become a part of the habitus, my focus was on those newcomers to the sixth-form.

Thus, the narratives explored in this chapter have raised questions about the use of habitus as an empirical research tool. It is a slippery concept, and there is doubtless a risk of seeing habitus as everywhere and nowhere in the young people's narratives. Through habitus, the interrelationship between gender and class is explored as an embodied and subjective response to entering the field. Using habitus to probe the narratives of middle-class students uncovers emotions and feelings which have otherwise been smoothed over or disregarded. Although empirical studies of the so-called 'gendered habitus' have emphasised how working-class women resist the threat of stigmatization, the young women here provide a more nuanced interplay between class and gender. Neither young woman could be described as working-class, yet they struggle to identify with the middle-class, independent students as presented through the school's dominant culture.

In its spotlight on the three newcomers, the chapter has sought to reveal habitus through their trajectory in the field. Whilst accounts from early into their two years at Grayshott could be understood as part of the 'settling in' process, I concluded that the sense of being outside, and above all, of questioning what is so usually taken for granted, continued. For the three newcomers, I found a contradiction to the usual depiction of middle-class confidence and self-assurance.

Furthermore, whilst the six continuing students appeared more at ease with life at Grayshott, to characterise them as uniformly confident and privileged would be wrong. Indeed, the account of homogeneity which dominates the literature is called into question when I follow all the students' university decision making. It is difficult to reconcile these students' narratives with the young people represented through the research of Reay et al (2005). Instead, the newcomers articulate insecurities and hesitations more usually associated with the educational trajectories of working-class young people. As such, their

narratives serve to problematise the notion that middle-class students' educational practices are characterised by entitlement and certainty.

Furthermore, the narratives question the extent to which the labels of class are meaningful and useful classifications with which to most fully develop classed practices research. The students whose stories are described in this chapter are more ambiguously tagged as middle-class by their parents' occupations. As such, they stand some distance from the more common portrayal in classed practices literature, and with their narratives articulating a hazy and indistinct kind of middle-classness. Consequently the tendency of classed practices research to work with binaries of class is in danger of misrepresenting those caught between the extremes of privilege and disadvantage. The three students featured in this chapter share a common class 'label', but this is a marker that fades away once they are positioned within the field.

The inadequacies of the old class vocabulary are all too evident. The young people share little in common with those whose stories have predominated in the classed practices literature. The middle-class label is one that smoothes over differences within a large and diverse group of occupations. Moreover, with classed practices literature's emphasis on the established middle-class, there is a risk of skating over the subtleties and finer gradations.

With my focus Grayshott Grammar, and with its high proportion of students being defined as 'middle-class', there was a means to draw distinctions and shade in detail otherwise overlooked in classed practices research. For example, in the students' ability to describe themselves relative to an 'average student' at Grayshott Grammar, we could identify the space between their own middle-class subjectivities and an institutionally-defined version of middle-classness. Thus, as newcomers to the sixth-form, the students' perceptions of those

'amazing all-rounders' shed light on how Grayshott constructs its class-coded culture. Their responses enable us to explore the fissures and crevices that are too often obscured by generalised representations of private schools and middle class privilege.

The middle-class students discussed here provide a contradiction and complication amidst the common representation of private schools as enclaves of privileged. The compounding of class and institution excludes the potential for young people's resistance or discomfort within the private sector. Moreover, the representation of privately-educated, middle-class students implicates their attendance at a fee-paying institution as equating greater class privilege than their middle-class peers in the state sector; indeed they are typified as the advantaged minority of the middle-class (Reay 2005). Yet the narratives discussed here articulate an insecurity and lack of confidence which repudiates the claimed assurance and ease associated with being both middle-class and privately educated. Indeed, their stories accentuate discord and conflict as they encounter an institution symbolising a middle-class culture that is unfamiliar, and in many ways, unwelcome.

## **Chapter 7: Middle-class students' decision-making – a three-way model**

### **Introduction**

This chapter's focus is on the young people's university decision-making processes, and it offers two key arguments in response to the classed

practices literature reviewed in chapter two. Firstly, that the dominant decision-making model obscures the extent of variation within the middle-class; and secondly, that notions of 'certainty and entitlement' need to be deconstructed to render them sociologically meaningful. By arguing for a more nuanced model of student choice, and by dissecting the widely asserted but vaguely-defined privilege of middle-class young people, this chapter's aim is to contribute to the deconstructive endeavour of this thesis.

I concluded in chapter two that the model provided 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 that binary model, and their work offers scope for further lines of enquiry which will be explored here. The narratives presented in this chapter contribute to, but in many ways challenge what has become an influential and pervasive model of student choice.

With the binary model of student decision-making drawing lines between the working and middle-class, there is a failure to accommodate an increasingly fluid and dynamic labour market, and which as I discussed in chapter one, provided one of the significant challenges to class analysis. Without shifting the focus of research away from binaries towards multiple lines of division, there is a danger of its agenda being perpetually captured within the old paradigm. Furthermore, despite the claim of a classed practices perspective to engage in a new programme of research and to take us beyond the limitations of class analysis, there is an inherent inclination to remain bound up with those interests.



Above all, there is a conflation of statistical outcomes and processes, and this is an important weakness. As the UCAS statistical data illustrated in chapter four, university participation remains structured by social class, with those who are defined as middle-class continuing to access the most prestigious institutions. Yet the literature silences middle-class young people, with their stories lost amidst the tendency to accent working-class disadvantage. Thus the promise of a classed practices approach is unrealised and we are left with an uneven account of educational practices. In spite of the claims to go beneath the data and to explore the practices which produce classed inequalities, we know little about the young middle-class. With their progression to prestigious university one characterised as straightforward and effortless, we risk colluding with, or solidifying that relationship.

This chapter therefore turns its attention to the practices and behaviours underlying middle-class university participation.

## **The participants**

Without doubt, for the majority of the twelve students who participated in this research their university destinations were ultimately impressive. Three received Oxbridge offers and six had places at other 'old' universities. Whilst it is not my intention to concentrate on the three examples of relative failure, they are included alongside the others and serve as a reminder that there are no absolute certainties. However, for the majority, success, as defined by offers from prestigious universities, was unmistakeable. However, in accordance with this thesis as a deconstructive endeavour, the purpose of this chapter is to focus on their educational practices, and in particular to explore here how they

narrowed the field of possibilities. The young people's stories had mainly happy endings, but their accounts did not resonate with the uniform and undifferentiated privilege suggested by the dominant model.

### **Beyond a binary model**

Reading the accounts of students' university decision-making articulated here, it is difficult to support Reay's assertion that 'a significant majority of middle-class applicants....were engaging with higher education choice in contexts of certainty and entitlement' (Reay et al 2005). Whilst three of the twelve students' stories were evocative of that claim, the remainder were more tentative and hesitant. As such, the model's representation of choice through a binary of middle-class advantage and working-class disadvantage is unable to explain the practices of those students whose middle-class tag obscures a more contradictory relationship with the field of higher education.

Therefore in my proposal for a three-way model of middle-class choice, I am suggesting that there is far greater variation than otherwise acknowledged. By focusing on their practices, these findings challenge the assumption of straightforward and easy journeys to prestigious university. This emphasis on practices and behaviours rather than outcomes can begin to demystify the relationship between middle-class students and the field of higher education. There is a danger otherwise of their success being reduced to something impenetrable and inexplicable. Moreover, by treating these young people as individuals in their own right, rather than through their parents' voices, we can develop a more incisive account of what is otherwise assumed and overlooked.

As my research question is searching for the subtle rather than the obvious, I am probing the differences that would otherwise be flattened out by the binary model of student decision-making. However, if the aim is to challenge the crude distinctions between middle-class and working-class decision-making it would be wrong to overlook what the three groups of middle-class choosers share in common. Let me be very clear therefore that in presenting three groups of middle-class chooser, the inter-class differences remain undeniably stark and powerful. Nevertheless, without exploring the nuances, we are left with a generalised representation of advantage which fails to take account of those lost between the extremes.

As I concluded in chapter two, the binary model takes insufficient account of the educational institution. The crudely-drawn representations of middle and working-class students were replicated in the depiction of private and State-sector institutions. Indeed the model risked conflating institution sector with social class and implicated the private sector as homogenously middle-class. The overwhelming sense therefore was of middle-class, privately-educated students enjoying double-privilege.

Student choice should not be considered as operating outside of or separate from the institutional environment. That context acts as a moderating variable, reinforcing, enhancing or compensating for each group's cultural and social capital. As discussed in chapter four, the two institutions which provide the setting for this study display very distinctive organisational cultures, and were positioned in different places within the field of education, both in terms of their relationship with other sixth-forms and in relation to prestigious universities. Models of student-decision-making which do not incorporate the educational institution and its place in the field, or instead conflate social class and

institution provide only a partial account. Individual choices must therefore be understood as taking place within their institutional context.

Before I explore the students' narratives in some detail, let me first provide a brief overview of the three models of student chooser that were revealed.

### **Natural, effortless, destined**

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 close 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, and rather as a part of normal conversation. These students hold high levels of cultural capital, and most notably display an easy and laid-back confidence during the university application process. The students are able to access very specific social capital through a variety of friends and family who have attended elite universities.

### **Strategic and ambitious**

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 may 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 like the first group they hold high levels of cultural capital, they are less confident in their approach, and less sure of their chances of reaching their ideal university destination. These students are keen to emphasise that they know the 'top' universities, and would like to apply, but are worried about the competition for places. The students are extremely knowledgeable as far as the hierarchy of universities is concerned and they invest considerable time in reading league tables and guides. 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**

The final group of students are described as 'aspiring and vocationally-specific choosers'. These are students whose families 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 describe 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. The students' 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 through friends.

### **Using Bourdieu's tools of capital and habitus as underpinning the model**

The model is developed through using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital to position young people in relation to the field of higher

education. These concepts enable us to explore decision-making in ways which problematise the notion of free and rational choice. Indeed, his concepts help us to reconcile the rather uncomfortable position of choice within a sociological agenda. The normal, everyday vocabulary of choice conveys a meaning which imputes agency and freewill: people are thought of as being 'free to choose' to 'make their own decisions'. However, Bourdieu's analytical framework enables us to research choice without losing sight of decisions as taking place within social structures. Through the mediation of habitus and field, Bourdieu carves a way between approaches which emphasise individual agency on the one hand, and structural constraints on the other.

Nevertheless, and as I discussed in chapter one, Bourdieu's conceptual framework is accused of being overly-deterministic and as reducing action to structural location. In response to the frequently-asked question of whether habitus rules out 'strategic choice and conscious deliberation', Bourdieu responds that 'the habitus may very well be accompanied by strategic calculation of costs and benefits, which tends to carry out at a conscious level the operations that habitus carries out in its own way' (Bourdieu and Wacquant: 1992:131). However, he goes on to explain that this takes place in 'times of crisis, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted' (ibid). This leaves open the question of how to interpret such 'times of crisis'. A literal interpretation would limit these occasions of strategic calculation to rare and unexpected events. However, read more figuratively, these are moments when habitus and field are imperfectly aligned or when entry to a new field is contemplated. At those times everything that is previously taken-for-granted is questioned and the usual workings of the habitus are interrupted.

Therefore through a Bourdieuan lens, choice stands in contrast to theories which emphasise rational decision-making, but at the same

time, does not rule out rationality as a response to certain situations. I suggest however that it is more helpful to consider choice and decision-making as part of Bourdieu's central concern to introduce practice and what he calls 'practical logic'. Choice is 'without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and 'reasonable' (Bourdieu 1977: 79). Therefore in looking at decision-making within a Bourdieuan framework is to understand individuals as inhabiting a 'logic of practice' which observed from the outside is recognised as strategic and rational. However, for the individual, and at the time those decisions are being made, their behaviour is simply part and parcel of their habitus, the natural way they do things.

Thus Bourdieu's entire approach is to develop a theory of practice which stands apart from rule-following or structural determination. Moreover, it is through the concept of habitus that strategy is introduced. A Bourdieuan model of student decision-making which incorporates strategy is therefore one which aims to introduce the dimension of time, and with it, uncertainty and ambiguity. The model focuses on the period when there are no guarantees; there is everything to play for, and only statistical probabilities. A model of choice must incorporate these doubts and anxieties, the false starts and panics which take place before their ultimately and statistically-predictable realisation.

Therefore with its introduction of uncertainty and strategy, habitus offers a significant and indeed crucial dimension to a Bourdieuan model of decision-making. Without habitus we are reduced to a sterile account of capital distribution. Nonetheless, the treatment of habitus is inadequately explored through the dominant model of middle-class decision-making. As I concluded in chapter two, whereas the concept of habitus has been most fully and effectively utilised to explain the feelings of discomfort and awkwardness experienced by working-class young people, emotions have been widely eliminated from accounts of

middle-class decision-making. Thus, rather little is known about the subjective dimensions of middle-class choice. Beyond sociologically unhelpful notions of 'confidence' and 'entitlement' we learn nothing about how the young people develop their affinity with prestigious universities. The assumption is that their access to high quality, 'hot knowledge' engenders a better understanding of university status and hierarchies and this in turn enables them to feel confident in their engagement with higher education choice. Indeed, the frequently referenced Bourdieuan notion of their 'feel for the game' is reduced to acquisition of 'hot knowledge'. There is very little sense of middle-class students acting through feelings or intuition, instead the emotions are something consigned to the realm of the working-class.

### **'Hot' knowledge**

The middle-class young people are commonly represented as accumulators of high-quality, insider knowledge which provides them with superior understanding of the field of higher education. What Reay et al define as 'hot knowledge' (2005) is determined by students' acquisition of cultural and social capital. However, 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. The emphasis is very firmly on parents acting on behalf of their children. 'Hot knowledge' has been characterised by active parental interventions, such as the purposeful gathering of information from family and friends. So in this chapter's shift of focus towards the young people, we hear their own articulation of the part that 'hot knowledge' plays in their decision-making. Thus with this change of emphasis, there is an attempt to strip away the layers of parental interpretation of decision-making that run through the literature.



Reay et al found that the use of 'hot knowledge' over official sources of information was common for those 'primarily at the two ends of the social spectrum....' (2005:152). This was a regular feature for two groups I had identified within my middle-class choosers. Those I had described as 'natural, effortless and destined' could be seen as belonging to the privileged end of the social spectrum, but it would be difficult to position the 'aspiring and vocationally-specific' students at the other extreme. Like the binary model's representation of working-class students, their information-gathering was random and indiscriminate. On the other hand, whilst the high-quality and institutionally-specific examples of 'hot knowledge' were evocative of the 'embedded choosers', its transmission was casual and relaxed. This 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. This is the challenge for empirical research; to move beyond general assertions of advantage as generated by undifferentiated forms of capital. The lack of conceptual precision is a weakness of 'capital' as a tool for empirical research, and as I discussed in chapter two, its tendency is to be used cumulatively and interchangeably. In contrast, and as I will discuss below, the narratives described here provide very clearly-defined examples of social capital at work. Stephen Ball cautions against its 'being sociologically useless as a result of over-use and misuse' (2005: 79). However I will argue that social capital offers the greatest potential for understanding and dissecting vague notions of privilege. Moreover, like all the forms of capital, it must be understood relationally. The

binary model gives insufficient emphasis to social capital as contested and contingent on its relationship with the field of higher education.

### **Narratives of choice**

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

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.

James:

*I am hoping to study either Physics or Natural Sciences at Cambridge. Um, 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. I know they are doing some very interesting research in Manchester. I think my father would prefer me to go to Cambridge as he went there, and my family have links with Manchester university, because both my grandparents studied maths there.*

For James, league tables offer little use in comparison with the family history of university. University decisions are part and parcel of the normal family discussions he remembers from childhood. Going to university has always been assumed, and Manchester or Cambridge present themselves as tried and tested options. These are not options

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.

For Michael, similarly at Grayshott Grammar, there is a close 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.

However, unlike James, Michael's narrative hints at resistance to the family tradition of Cambridge. He tells me he would prefer to apply to Nottingham where his brother is studying:

*My father took natural sciences at Cambridge and he thinks I would enjoy it there. We were up there for a party a few months ago. Do you know what, I'm not sure though...I saw they didn't allow football on the college green... Cambridge as a town seems*

*a bit quiet. I know deep down my father would like me to apply, but I'd prefer to go somewhere more lively like Nottingham where my brother's studying.*

When I meet him again, Michael tells me that he decided against applying to Cambridge, and that he has now received an offer for Oxford. He explains how he came to apply to Oxford.

*Um, after I ruled out Cambridge, because um I went to look at both, but I really preferred Oxford. I think it's more um a university in a city, rather than a city which is a university. I mean Cambridge is very quiet, and there's not much else. With Oxford there's more going on. 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.*

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 or web-pages. Michael is able to draw 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 to meaningful and distinctive options there for his choosing. After a hint of rebellion, ultimately the field of higher education is narrowed to particular Oxbridge colleges.

For Felicity too, the range of options is very 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. Felicity's decision-making was based on advice from her parents, aunts and cousins. In this way 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.

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.*

Decision-making is based on detailed and specific information from within the family. Felicity reduces the field of universities to just places for people like her 'really bright' cousin, and places for those 'normal people' like herself who 'want to have a social life'. Of course those 'normal people universities' represent just a tiny fraction of universities. 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 those 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 and she articulates no understanding of the field of higher education beyond a handful of prestigious institutions.

For those I have described as 'natural, effortless, destined', decisions are made from their already being within the field. 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.

Although Michael, James and Felicity have attended Grayshott Grammar for the whole of their secondary education, this model of choosing is not necessarily restricted to those in the independent sector. The high levels of capital derived from family are enough. 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 other students, none of the

three described seeking advice from the tutors or Careers Advisor allocated in helping students in their decision-making.

In many ways, their narratives were a rejection and contradiction of 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 particular feature 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 university town or local area. Again, this is suggestive of the thin line between family and elite university: boundaries 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.

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).

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. Their experience is not obstructed by the social barriers described by some of the other students in the group, who in common with the common representation of working-class students' interview experience, found them challenging and sometimes traumatic.

Close proximity to the field through habitus and capital is misrecognised as confidence and ease at university interviews. I have already alluded to the difficulties in using Bourdieu's capitals empirically, and there is no doubt too that the lines blur between family and institution as sites for their accumulation. However, for the 'natural, effortless and destined', 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.

Furthermore, 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 domain 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 positioned within the field.

### **‘Strategic and ambitious’ decision-making**

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 want to move out and be more independent. Possibly go to London, Kings College maybe....possibly to Cardiff. Then you’ve got the northern, like Birmingham, Manchester.... Or...if I don’t get any of them...then there’s possibly like Exeter, Bristol.....’*

*‘Um, then you’ve got Birmingham....they’re good universities, it’s just more area than university, but I assess it on both things. Like Loughborough...that’s a good university but the area’s rubbish, there’s nothing there. Um 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...*

Stephen 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 there are not familiar or known places.

Unlike those in the first group of students, there is no direct experience or family history of higher education in this country. He complains how his parents have been actively researching university options. He tells me they have strong views on what his future career will be and how they have accumulated a vast array of material. Stephen explains how he uses prospectuses, together with league tables to find his UCAS choices. His options are evaluated according to his expected A-level grades, and he seems to have 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 to those of James, Michael and Felicity.

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.

The process of choosing university options is not natural or easy. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the family have expectations of their son following a science-based career. These plans are in conflict with Stephen's academic strengths in English and the humanities. The head of sixth-form is able to persuade the family that a career in law would

offer a reasonable alternative and Stephen's parents construct an alternative career hierarchy. Stephen explains how after a couple of weeks 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 University's are quite keen on that.*

Grayshott Grammar plays an important role in Stephen's decision-making. The sixth-form tutors can be seen as providing repair work when the original plans begin to disintegrate soon into his A-level study. University choices result from sensitive 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 necessarily limited range of possibilities.

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 and Warwick, although she tells me she will need 'straight As for these', and is worried about whether this is achievable.

Like Stephen, Louise's parents have not been to university, and she describes them as actively and enthusiastically sending for prospectuses. The choices of university and career were depicted as a family rather than individual endeavour, with what Diane Reay has described as 'emotional capital' invested by the mother:

*Well my mum has always said that she's thought it would be a good career for me, and I took the AS in Law and I really enjoyed it. I don't know, I think it's really well-paid, it's really interesting, and I'd like to be a barrister. I think the whole research thing and presenting the case and that....I think it would be really interesting. I don't know what type of law though.*

In the end, Louise takes up a place to study Law at the University of London, however I am left wondering whether this is her own or her mother's dream.

Mothers are described as being actively involved for all of the students in this group, and of the six, none had gone on to higher education as young women, although three had subsequently studied at university as mature students.

Whereas in chapter eight I explore the process of decision-making from the mothers' perspectives, in this chapter the young people offer a somewhat contradictory account. Ruth, whose mother described the extensive support provided in the 'university project', was the source of considerable frustration for her daughter, and the support was translated as interference:

*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.*

For Ruth and her mother, 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. It as if she is carrying the weight of her mother's past disappointments and missed opportunities.

Whilst I have characterised Ruth, Stephen and Louise as illustrating a strategic and planned approach to the narrowing the field of university choices, these 'strategies' are understood in Bourdieuan terms, and as Swartz observes:

Bourdieu adopts the language of 'strategy' to distance himself from strict structural forms of determination by stressing the importance of agency within a structuralist framework (Swartz 1997:98).

The language of strategy is an attempt to incorporate the sense of an individual's game-awareness, or how they understand the rules of the field. These are not rational cost-benefit calculations, but the practical logic that individuals accumulate over time. For those students I have classified as 'strategic and ambitious' the field of elite universities is new and unfamiliar to them. There is no close relationship to the field of elite universities and no instinctive knowledge on which to draw. Their applications are completed through intensive effort and careful research.

For Ruth, Stephen and Louise, the narratives of decision-making articulate a strong sense of institutional influence. Their accounts offer illustrations of how 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 process, Stephen has nevertheless gained access via more subtle and indirect means.

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.

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, their accounts do not evoke a sense of their being on a conveyor-belt to elite universities. Instead, there is a lot of individual and family effort put into the process. Unlike the first group, these students are seeking entry to a new field, rather than working within its symbolic boundaries already. There are very real barriers and hurdles to encounter and the private school provides a means to increase their chances. Stocks of cultural capital, and more especially social capital are enhanced by their being within the independent system. But to some extent the institution is simply confirming choices and nudging them along when they stray off course.

So far, the young people I have characterised as 'strategic and ambitious' have been students at Grayshott Grammar, and I have argued that their cultural and social capital has been enhanced through that institution. I am ending this section with two accounts which present a slightly different perspective. First, I will discuss Pam, who in the previous chapter illustrated what it is to be an outsider at Grayshott Grammar. Second, I will consider Richard, who left Grayshott Grammar for Winterbourne College. Both offer an interesting reversal to what has been presented so far, and indeed serve to counter the assumed cumulative effect of class educational institution.

Pam provides an example of how Grayshott Grammar is not always able to steer its students towards a successful outcome. For Pam, after initially telling me she wanted to study at Bristol or Warwick, the two-years at Grayshott Grammar ended with her leaving to 'go travelling with a boyfriend' and without a university offer to return to. The promise of a 'fresh start' offered by Grayshott Grammar was not realised. While she assured me that she would be reapplying to university, it was difficult to anticipate anything other than further

disappointment. Perhaps Pam's case provides an exception to prove the rule or a blip in the statistics. Alternatively, she offers an account of how the decision-making process can be thrown off course by falling in love. However her story is also about being an outsider and not fitting in. Her narrative illustrates the incompatibility between habitus and field, and the ultimate rejection of the dominant cultural capital of Grayshott Grammar.

By contrast, Richard's narrative is one of success, and his offer from Cambridge was made more likely, in his view, by 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 described in this chapter, Richard's narrative 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. According to Richard, his chances of being accepted at one of these universities would be enhanced by applying from the state sector.

Richard's narrative tells us about the specificity and symbolically arbitrary nature of capital. Having left the independent 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 was ineligible to apply as a private school student. However, less concrete, but still an important narrative theme was Richard's attempts to shake off what he perceived to be the stigma of private school. For Richard, and chiming with his mother's narrative in the next chapter, the move to Winterbourne College represented an opportunity to enhance his cultural capital.

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 who aspire to be the first of their family to participate in higher education. Their role can be seen as an affirmation of the system. Perhaps they go some way to legitimating the rhetoric of widening participation, with their first-time experience of higher education an endorsement. However, these are not the working-class young people whose participation remains qualitatively different or non-existent. These are the ubiquitous yet invisible middle-class, arguable those described by Mike Savage as 'particular-universal' 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**

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. Sharon, who left Grayshott Grammar for Winterbourne College, 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 and then one of my friends does pharmacy at university. He's just finished university this year...and he's quite close to us. So he tells us about it and stuff. It's quite difficult. Obviously all courses are difficult, but it's just the way he talks about it and stuff, he kind of put me off it. Then I did work experience and stuff for a week in February and um....I found it....at the time when I first did it... um it was quite exciting and stuff, then looking back at it, it was really boring.*

Sharon makes some reference to using the web to gather information on possible degree courses, however she tells me that she trusts her friends to know what she would like. For Sharon, knowledge of universities and courses was acquired on a fairly random basis, mainly through friends in Winterbourne College who had visited universities themselves, and some who had already left for university. Whereas in her study, Rachel Brooks (2005) found that friends claimed not to talk to each other very much about university choices, for Sharon, the friends she made at college appeared to be crucial in her decision-making. Her narrative conveys no sense of drawing support from family members, and she describes her parents as not really understanding the university system.

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, and when she 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.

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.

The approaches of Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College reflect their very different positions in relation to the field of higher education. As discussed in chapter five, 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 power of the sixth-form institution, but indicative of the surprisingly faltering and fragmented middle-class decision-making processes.

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. Furthermore, when I asked, she said they had told her about the academic reputation of the universities she had applied to.

*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.*

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.

Like the working-class students typified in the binary model, 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 interview, and she tells me that she knew little of what to expect of the process. For Jemima, decision-making is characterised by the haphazardness and opportunism associated with working-class practice.

Having met Jemima on five occasions during her time at Winterbourne College I was surprised how infrequently she mentioned the college. However, she told me that she had turned to the Careers Advisor when she was rejected from the University of London. She felt her chance to go to university was disappearing, and was worried that she might not get the required grades. This, she said, would mean having to take a diploma course instead of a degree. The Careers Advisor's intervention was to contact a number of universities to ask whether they would consider lowering their entry requirements. His role can be seen as

rebuilding confidence and in many ways compensating for lack of cultural capital from within the family. His interventions helped her achieve what was perhaps a more realistic goal. However, it is difficult to reconcile her ultimate destination to study Nursing at City University with the ambitions she had described during our first meeting. In many ways the college's advice must be seen as complicity with Jemima's lowering aspirations:

*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.*

Jemima had originally 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.

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 told me:

*I'd like to get into banking and my A-levels are Business Studies, Maths and English. I've heard that there's a good career potential in banking and I want to be as successful as I can. I know that there are some courses like at LSE 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), and I want to be successful, so that's why I've chosen those subjects...*

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 lucrative.

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 in derogatory terms:

*My mum and dad think I should do maths at university because they say that I'll need that if I want to get into banking. They said I can do anything I want as long as it's got maths with it. They don't know anything about it really, and I think they just want to show off if you know what I mean!*

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 her parents about alternative undergraduate programmes in 'respectable universities' that will lead towards her chosen career in banking.

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. However, as I discussed in chapter five, the narrowing of students' choices is also part of its construction of an institutionally-valued cultural capital. The institution promotes its students' success in the 'established universities', and as the data showed, few attend 'new universities.

In this fee-paying sixth-form, the process of university decision-making is carried out within very narrow boundaries and under the close scrutiny of tutors. Kate described how the UCAS application process is monitored:

*You write a draft statement in the summer holidays and then you are given a teacher who knows most about the course you want to do. I sat down with Mrs Baker for about an hour, and she basically crossed through a lot of what I'd put! She showed me how to write a really good statement, you know to sell myself and make the best impression.*

Whereas Winterbourne College encourages self-reliance and independence, Grayshott Grammar is encouraging its students to surrender active choice making. Nevertheless, as chapter five explored, it is evident that these choices are a negotiation and reconciliation of individual, institutional and family wishes. Furthermore, I interpreted the narrow parameters as meeting parents' expectations of the sixth-form's facilitating pathways to middle-class careers.

For the students I have described as 'aspiring and vocationally-specific', the relationship between family and higher education is fragile or non-existent. 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 about lack of knowledge, but also examples of a habitus that



generated fear and uncertainty. For example, the interview process was something that produced a very different response than described by the students I had defined as 'natural and effortlessly destined'. For Jemima, the experience was something she had not anticipated, and afterwards her account conveyed considerable confusion and misunderstanding of the process. She told me her only preparation was when she chatted with fellow applicants on the day as they guessed what questions might be asked. After the rejection she admitted that it would have been better to have had some 'practice at one the less popular universities'. For Sharon, the interview process was described as 'traumatic'. Despite receiving an offer, her memory of the application process is overshadowed by a very negative impression.

Thus, in this final group of students, there is very little evidence of their practices as resonating with the other students' accounts described in this chapter. The narratives are those of students positioned on the outside of the field of higher education. Their habitus generates responses which are both negative and self-deprecating. These accounts articulate an impression of higher education as slightly beyond their grasp, rather than realistic choices.

## **Conclusions**

I have explored how the students are variously equipped in their ability to narrow the field of possibilities and I have argued that within this group of middle-class young people there are wide variations in knowledge and behaviour. Undoubtedly imprecise tools, using capitals nevertheless provided a way to conceptualise decision-making beyond straightforward associations of structural class location. However, the development of a binary model to illustrate classed practices is limited.

Above all, there is a lack of any in-depth account of middle-class practices which engender their superior 'feel for the game'.

Indeed, this 'feel for the game' is reduced to acquisition of 'hot knowledge', and the emotional dimensions of decision-making are consigned as the realm of the working-class. Whereas the concept of habitus is most fully and effectively utilised to explain the feelings of discomfort and awkwardness experienced by working-class young people, emotions are eliminated from middle-class decision-making. Thus, rather little is known about the subjective dimensions of middle-class choice. Beyond sociologically unhelpful notions of 'confidence' and 'entitlement' we learn nothing about how the young people develop their affinity with prestigious universities. The assumption is that their access to high quality, 'hot knowledge' engenders a better understanding of university status and hierarchies and this in turn enables the young people to feel confident in their engagement with higher education choice.

I therefore developed a three-way model of middle-class decision-making which attempted to work more closely with habitus, and furthermore, to differentiate sources of capital through family or educational institution. This model enables us to position the middle-class young people in relation to the field of higher education, and I conclude that the 'natural, effortless, destined' group are in many ways already a part of that field. Their accounts have enabled us to deconstruct the generalised and vague notions of privilege provided in the dominant representations of choice. Their embeddedness is characterised above all through exposure rather than active accrual of 'hot knowledge'. So unlike the usual portrayal, this is gained through a more subtle inculcation as family life and higher education become entwined. The expressions of confidence and the apparent ease with

which they access the elite universities are masked by social and cultural capital.

For the 'strategic and ambitious' group, their higher education participation is characterised by vigilance and hard work. The key stake in their game is, above all, cultural capital. Without a family tradition of university participation, their decisions are data-intensive and well-researched. These are middle-class students who typify the 'particular-universal' nature of middle-class practice, with their accounts of careful decision-making difficult to read as anything other than efforts to do the right thing.

For those designated as 'aspiring and vocationally-specific', their narratives are of young people whose lack of cultural and social capital generates an uncertain and apprehensive habitus. Whilst their narratives have little in common with the middle-class model of decision-making, there is no suggestion that choice is constrained by financial limitations. As such, their narratives offer a contradiction to both middle-class and working-class models of choice. Moreover, their relationship with the field of higher education raises interesting questions about the nature of the less tangible impediments to broadening boundaries of choice to embrace prestigious universities.

## **Chapter 8: 'They'd rather lose their right arm than send their children to State school'. (Barbara, mother of Ruth).**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, my aim is to further unpack what it means to be middle-class, and to probe more deeply into the 'particular-universal' and 'unacknowledged normality' of mothers' actions and attitudes towards their children's education. It is a shift of emphasis, with its attention moving away from the young people themselves to their parents. Through listening to the way in which these educational practices are articulated, the chapter develops a deeper understanding of how the middle-class makes, and makes sense of its decisions. The chapter engages with two specific examples of practice: first, the decision to use private education, and second, the role of mothers in the university application process.

In exploring accounts of using private education, I return to some key concerns of this thesis. Whether classed practices are understood and described through the language of exploitation and conflict is yet to be fully articulated in the educational classed practices literature. As I noted in chapter two, the issue of exploitation is implied, but not adequately dealt with, and there is some reluctance to use the term unequivocally. Instead, it is implied and alluded to. For example, Stephen Ball refers to the middle-class as 'caught up within the reproduction of more general relations of exploitation', and he argues that 'the strategies of social advantage pursued by middle-class families have untoward, exploitative consequences for other social groups' (2003: 10-11). If elsewhere the language is sometimes indirect, and

sometimes euphemistic, the claims are made nevertheless. Moreover, the use of private education is offered as the critical emblem of exploitation. Consequently, the decision to use private education presents a vehicle in which to unpack the concept of exploitation in relation to the classed practices agenda. Moreover, through distinguishing between 'advantage' and 'adequacy' Ball provides us with useful notions with which to articulate it.

Thus, in the accounts of choosing private education, we move some way towards considering whether classed practices can be interpreted through the language of exploitation. In making the distinction between 'advantage' and 'adequacy' we are given a route into the difficult and emotive dimensions of classed practices. Through taking hold of the way in which 'advantage' and 'adequacy' is articulated through these narratives, we can think more carefully about the nature of the practices which constitute exploitation. In exploring these issues, the chapter addresses how the classed practices model relates to one of the key facets of traditional class analysis.

Secondly, the chapter explores how the mothers articulate their involvement in the university decision-making process. My aim is to deconstruct the otherwise rather hazy and indistinguishable forms of capital. Through accounts of their children's university applications, we can explore the different forms and utilisations of capital. In this way, their narratives take us beyond the generalised assertions of 'certainty and entitlement' (Reay et al 2005:62), and towards a closer understanding of the interventions of the 'self-interested and calculating' middle-class (Ball 2003).

After having introduced the themes of this chapter, I will now sketch out its structure.

The chapter's main conceptual focus is on habitus, and how it is revealed through mothers' stories of their children joining, and in one case, eventually leaving Grayshott Grammar. I consider how they articulate the very personal and individual decisions about their children's education. I then discuss how 'first impressions' of Grayshott Grammar are narrated. These provide fascinating accounts of entering an environment which is visually and symbolically foreign and threatening for all three. The chapter continues with a focus on capital, and I explore the nature of the resources that are used by families to support their children's university decisions. I consider the extent to which mothers are involved, and what form their involvement takes. The narratives help us to understand parental interventions, and indeed that of the wider family, with what one mother describes as the 'university project'.

Thus, this chapter takes me further in the attempt to deconstruct homogenous representations of middle-class parents. Moreover, through this chapter's interest only in those I defined as 'strategic and ambitious', the mothers' narratives can be compared to the dominant representation of middle-class practices, and in particular, its tendency to produce a stereotypical 'pushy parent'. By exploring these narratives in some depth, the chapter moves beyond what has become established within the dominant paradigm, and in doing so offers a more nuanced understanding of classed practices.

## **The participants**

Before delving into the narratives themselves, let me first say something about the participants. As others have noted, mothers rather than fathers are more commonly identified as taking a leading role in their children's educational decision-making (Allatt 1993; Lareau

1989; Reay 2004). This was certainly true of the young people's accounts of parental intervention in my study. Despite 11 of the 12 young people living with both parents, fathers were infrequently mentioned. So it was therefore not a surprise that mothers, rather than fathers gave their consent to participate. I have already discussed how those volunteers, from a potential of 23 individuals, were limited to three. Furthermore, that they were mothers of 'strategic and ambitious' students, was interesting in itself. As I observed in the previous chapter, these students described approaches and attitudes towards university decision-making which resonated with dominant representations of the middle-class as knowledgeable consumers of the education market. I hoped their mothers' narratives would offer an insight into what had become apparent from their children was the 'university project'.

Let me provide a brief description of the participants.

Richard's mother, 'Isabel', teaches at a French language club for young children. She is married to Robert, a Manager for a large financial organisation. Isabel left school at 16, and during her 20s worked in a variety of administrative roles. She moved from France to the UK when her children were young. Richard, her elder son, attended Grayshott Grammar from the age of ten until sixteen, when he transferred to Winterbourne College.

Ruth's mother, Barbara, is married to David, a lawyer. Barbara was educated in Australasia, and she left school at 16. After gaining secretarial qualifications and working for a short time as a PA, she married to have children and moved to the UK to start her family. Now in her late 40s, she has recently completed a PhD after returning to study 10 years ago. Ruth joined the Grayshott Grammar at age 11, and remained there during sixth-form.

Pam's mother, 'Jackie', is a single parent who works as a healthcare adviser. Jackie left school at 16, and worked as a PA during her 20s. She returned to college in her 30s, and now in her 50s, she is half-way through studying for a Masters degree via distance learning. Jackie moved Pam from a state comprehensive to Grayshott Grammar's sixth-form.

### **Articulating choice – glimpsing habitus**

In chapter three, I discussed how the collection of narrative accounts through the process of active listening advocated by Wengraf provided an imitation of real-life. I argued that data emerging from a narrative was the closest reproduction of naturally occurring conversation. Moreover, that as such it should be treated with similar caution. The women's narratives illustrate how accounts of practices are bound within a normative framework. Their stories not only offer insights into their decisions, but importantly, how they imagine those decisions will be perceived. Thus, rather than dismissing the artificiality of what Yanos and Hopper refer to as the 'press release' information (2006), I suggest the headlines may be as revelatory as the subtext.

As I will show through the discussion below, narratives can be considered as whole stories or in terms of in-depth analysis of small slices of text. Considered in its entirety, the narrative may be probed for coherence and contradictions. Repeated readings reveal sub-plots beyond headline stories, and themes emerge to reveal more complex and multi-layered undertones. When focussing on smaller chunks, we can probe more deeply into the language and how it is structured.



I will now discuss how the mothers described their children's move to Grayshott Grammar. The move was not described in terms of following family tradition or as part of any particular plan. Rather, the decision was explained by Isabel as resulting from dissatisfaction with state schools, and in the words of Ruth's mother, a 'last resort'. For Jackie, her daughter's move to Grayshott Grammar at 16 was a last minute decision and one she articulated as 'an opportunity to have the education I missed'.

The narratives were on one level straightforward accounts of choosing private education in response to dissatisfaction. However, and as will be seen from the extracts below, the narratives were evocative of far more. Above all, they remind us that the choice of independent education is fraught with perceptions of snobbery, privilege and exclusivity. Educational choices embody norms of not only good-parenting, but the thorny subject of ethics and principles too. The narratives conveyed sensitivities about judgements of known and unknown others. Therefore the narratives could be read as the women's attempts to resist being labelled as a private school parent. As such, I suggest that explanations of decision-making should be viewed through a kaleidoscope of intentions, delusions and imagination.

Let me start by looking at Isabel's narrative. Reducing her story to a very simple structure of orientation, complication and resolution offers an initial glimpse of her habitus. The story begins with an account of Isabel's move from mainland Europe to the UK. This is an orientation to the main plot and complicating action, which are the difficulties in finding a good, local state school for her sons. The story's resolution can be understood as having two stages. First, Isabel describes having found a private school for her sons, and then finally, her story ends with the elder son joining a local, state sixth-form college (Winterbourne). Simplifying a narrative to orientation, complication and resolution

enables us to strip away the complexities and nuances to reveal something of Isabel's relationship to the field of education. For Isabel, the decision to use private education is a tactical, temporary response to dissatisfaction with state education. However, as I will discuss below, the source and nature of that dissatisfaction is concealed between her 'press release' and the more deeply embedded, and implicit themes of her narrative. Indeed it is here, in the space between headlines and subtext that we can begin to disentangle how decisions revolve around notions of 'advantage and adequacy'.

The 'press-release' of Isabel's narrative is an articulation of popular frustrations concerning education provision. This is arguably 'safe' territory and the predictable responses and normative behaviour of a mother. Isabel told me she had wanted her children to go to the school nearby her home. She explained that in France, they had used the local school and had been very happy with it. However, on moving to the UK when her sons were coming to the end of primary school, she was unhappy with the school in her catchment area. She described having visited the school and spoken to its headteacher, but ultimately having been concerned by its large class sizes. Isabel told me that as a result, her sons were sent to Grayshott Grammar, and when I interviewed her, the eldest had returned to the state sector, joining Winterbourne College. The use of independent schooling was explained as a temporary measure to overcome perceived shortcomings in local provision. Isabel said:

*If the secondary school up to sixteen had been to the level of Winterbourne College we would not have sent Richard to a private school. Because I think we did not find the equivalent in the state sector. We didn't find the kind of education we wanted.... you know, the small classrooms and the education we wanted for both our children.....it's quite a commitment....it's a big decision to*

*make financially, but looking back, it's the right decision. The sixth-form, I don't think it was necessary because he was set on his tracks, he knew what he wanted.*

Rather than a positive choice, Grayshott Grammar was described as offering an alternative to poor state provision, and Isabel articulates her decision-making in terms of quality of teaching provision and resources. The narrative presents a rational, strategic and measured response, and the choice of Grayshott Grammar resolved a specific problem. However, as Isabel reflects on her decision, there is a suggestion that private education has provided far more than 'small classrooms' and 'better resources'. Isabel describes her son as now 'set on his tracks', and this phrase hints at Grayshott Grammar having fulfilled expectations which were less clearly articulated. Isabel tells me that she would be happy for her sons to become 'bakers or mechanics, you know that sort of thing', but when Richard leaves Grayshott he has formulated a very clear idea of his future, which he told me at that time meant a career as a navy pilot. The school can be seen as keeping Isabel's son on an academic path, and having achieved outstanding GCSE results, in her words, he is now mature enough to 'be trusted to get on with it'. Grayshott Grammar has done its job and her son can safely return to the state sector.

Isabel's evaluation of her decision to use the Winterbourne College evokes some interesting parallels with the findings of Crozier et al's research (2008). In that research, the middle-class parents' articulated the benefits from mixing with a wider group of students, and for Isabel too, the decision is perceived to offer her son some 'real-life experience'. She is keen to express a democratic and fair-minded attitude, telling me she hopes it will show her son that 'poor people can still be nice people'. However, just as Crozier et al found, strongly principled, democratic discourses were not always consistent with their efforts to advantage

their children within the school. Isabel's story provides similar contradictions.

On the one hand, Isabel's account of her son's move to Winterbourne College can be read as encouraging and celebrating its more varied mix of students:

*At Winterbourne College he's met children with parents with not quite as much money. It's taught him that money doesn't grow on trees. He's got a little part-time job. It's taught him about life and it's a nice... in between, you know, university and the very protected private school (Grayshott Grammar). It's taught him independence and also that there are people who are not well off and there are people who have to make sure they can afford what they want.....a bit of an eye opener....*

The ability for her son to develop beyond the confines of his 'protected private school' is ostensibly one of the benefits to be gained from joining Winterbourne College. A reasonable interpretation from this extract is that Richard's mother is keen for him to integrate with a broader range of students from Winterbourne College's more diverse intake. However, elsewhere, when she tells me where her son's friends are due to study she says:

*One friend (formerly from Grayshott Grammar) is going to study medicine, in London, is that Kings College London, I think? He's got another friend from (formerly from Grayshott Grammar) who's going to Durham and he's got two friends (new friends made at Winterbourne College) going to Clare's as well. Another two (still at Grayshott Grammar) are going to Kings, Cambridge. I think they tend to mix with the children who have something in common with, and that's the result. It's obviously the children*

*who have been doing well at school who get to these good universities.*

Richard's mother notes that these are high-achievers who have formed a close group, having 'something in common'. Whilst there is nothing unusual or surprising in mixing with similarly academic students, this is not indicative of the imagined diversity. There is no sense that the move to Winterbourne College has disrupted existing ties. The friendship group continues to be populated by former schoolmates, and new friends who stand out as having secured places at elite university or medical school. Moreover, his own and his friends' university destinations are distinctive from the patterns for Winterbourne College identified in chapter four.

The narrative headline is one that emphasises 'adequacy' rather than 'advantage'. Isabel's reasons for choosing independent education are articulated as a response to unsatisfactory local schools. The local provision was seen as lacking, and Grayshott Grammar offered an acceptable solution. In describing the return to state education, Isabel's narrative is once again accenting 'adequacy'. For her son to continue at Grayshott Grammar is for him to be cosseted and 'spoonfed'. Winterbourne College is seen as compensating for her son having been privately educated, and as allowing him to mature in the real world. Isabel's account of her son's move to Winterbourne College provides an interesting contrast to that of her son. For Richard, the move would give him a very clear and specific advantage, which he articulated in two ways. Firstly, in his eligibility to apply for the Cambridge summer school, and secondly, in his perception that applying to university as a privately-educated student would have disadvantaged him. Thus, for Richard, there is a more strategic intention than would appear from his mother's account.

For Isabel, the emphasis is on her wanting adequate educational provision, and if this was met by the state sector, than all well and good. With the emphasis on her son's return to the state sector, Isabel can be seen to anticipate or defend herself from perceived criticism of her use of the private sector. Her narrative accentuates the costs of private education, and she positions herself as an ordinary person. Her accent on returning to the state sector is a declaration of her being normal and average, and with the use of Grayshott Grammar as short-term corrective action, not a natural choice for her, merely a necessity. Yet, at the same time, with its frequent references to the costs of private education, Isabel's narrative suggests financial reasons for leaving, and which she is reluctant to offer as a primary motivation. We thus reach the limitations of interviews, which just like real-life conversations are only ever partial accounts. As discussed in chapter three, I am not looking for the objective truth, and instead hoping to explore narratives for what they reveal about *accounts* of practice. The narrative interview is, above all, an opportunity to unpick the subtext from the dominant themes, and in doing so consider what those contradictions reveal. Rather than looking to determine the 'real' reason, I suggest that it is enough to recognise and consider these competing narrative threads. In Isabel's story we heard educational practices articulated through the language of 'adequacy', and from time to time, suggestions of 'advantage' surfacing.

By contrast, the notion of 'advantage' was more obviously articulated through Barbara's narrative. Like Isabel, there was a similar recognition of Grayshott Grammar being set apart from 'real life', and her daughters and son remained at the school from the age of 11 until leaving for university. Just as Isabel had referred to Grayshott Grammar as a 'very protected' place, this was an important theme in Barbara's narrative. Barbara was keen to tell me that her children, having been educated at a state primary school, were able to mix with all kinds of

people. Her narrative emphasised an awareness of her children's privilege relative to her own education, and as this extract illustrates, her children's understanding of their advantages compared with peers:

*When they went to Grayshott Grammar they would quite often get heckled by the children from (the local state school)....and when like they were standing on the platform for the train or whatever and they'd be like chucking things over. But it didn't worry them so much because it was almost like they appreciated the fact that they.... like (younger daughter) used to say something like.... you know she's quite old-fashioned, and her grandfather used to say 'Ruth is so funny with some of the things she says, like we're so privileged to be able to go to this school...'.she could you know, appreciate it, having been in both sectors... she could really appreciate it and I wouldn't have it any other way.*

Barbara's narrative provides an emotional and detailed account of why her younger daughter moved to Grayshott Grammar during the final year of primary school. Describing her daughter as having been incredibly unhappy and bullied, the move to Grayshott Grammar was 'a last resort', and in response to a particular crisis. Barbara's narrative contains the drama, pathos and occasional humour of a soap opera. This was not just the account of her daughter's move to the independent sector, but her brother and sister's subsequent transfer too. All three children's stories were jumbled together to provide a colourful, seemingly authentic narrative of family life. Unlike Isabel's measured and careful account, Barbara's narrative presented a rather chaotic and muddled articulation of decision-making. Nevertheless, beneath the layers of its rather confused and unwieldy style, a number of messages were conveyed. Above all, this was a cautionary tale about friends and neighbours who had kept their children in the state sector:

*A lot of Ruth's friends are doing like hairdressing courses at the polytech, you know where they go and do it like one day a week and work at the same time. I just felt like Grayshott Grammar gave the children an expectation, you know the children they were mixing with, they look at them, and their parents, and at the sorts of jobs they're doing. It's almost like they don't consciously think about it and when they start thinking about what sort of career they might like to do, they just aim, just think higher...I suppose the thing is that we have friends, most my friends have children who were in (both her daughters') classes at state school and children who were of similar ability....and they left with Bs and Cs and Ds. Some friends even got offers at places like Oxford, failed to get the grades and never went, really let down.*

This is a narrative about having found the 'right' kind of mix within Grayshott Grammar, and furthermore, a mix that will advantage her children. There is an assumption that private education will provide suitable friends. Those friends were deemed suitable by their professional parents, who for Barbara, were seen as inculcating professional ambitions. The decision to use private education can be seen as using economic capital to enhance social capital. Although less tangible than Stephen's law firm placement I described in chapter six, Grayshott Grammar is imagined as a place to inspire and encourage her children, and it offers her children advantage over others. They, unlike her friends' children, have protection from making the wrong career choices. Decisions are tightly bounded by Barbara's imagination of what is and is not appropriate, and with her friends' children providing cautionary tales. She tells me what can happen to those who are less careful and leave education to chance:



*And I wouldn't say this, because people say that middle-class parents move their children on, but my friends, who I would also say are middle-class, their children, like one of her good friends who I would also say is middle-class and a very similar ability to her, she's now studying at Nottingham Trent, so that's not at University.*

There are frequent and explicit references to class contained within this very brief extract. The short paragraph is worth looking at in some detail because it reveals the complex and contradictory nature of what it means to be middle-class. The first reference to class suggests Barbara's awareness and some degree of defensiveness about being seen as middle-class. That unspecified 'people say' the middle-class 'move their children on' captures Barbara's sensitivity to being marked as pushy or ambitious. It is recognition that middle-class parents are seen as wanting 'advantage' over 'adequacy', with the middle-class child put before an unspecified other.

The reference to her friends is an almost tacit claim to her own middle-class identity, and the conditional 'would' introduces a little doubt or uncertainty as to whether she is correct in that assertion. Nevertheless, Barbara is very keen to reinforce her decision to send her children to Grayshott Grammar as a means to avoid any potential hiccups, which in this paragraph is represented through going to Nottingham Trent, and in the previous extract, was through failing to achieve A-level grades.

These narrative extracts convey the salience of class for Barbara, and moreover, how this is played out through the imagined futures for her children. Barbara is sure about what she considers constitutes a 'proper' university and career. The boundary between success and failure is clearly identified. There is little scope for individual decision-making, or her children following their own interests. Her narrative is more about

anxiety and seeing the private sector as protecting her children against failure. She considers her friends' children have been let down by the state sector, and implicitly by their parents too. Barbara's narrative is one that conveys the choice of private school as the right decision, the sensible course of action that caring, middle-class parents ought to have taken. Barbara has been taken aback by what she considers to be the failures of her middle-class friends' children.

Although willing to describe herself as 'middle-class', Barbara knows it is an identity which is subject to the critical judgement of others. So, as the following extract illustrates, by educating her children in the private sector, she is eager to distance herself from parents she sees as its typical consumers:

*We've met a lot of people who've said 'oh no', and they'd rather lose their right arm than send their children to state school. I just can't understand it. We can't.*

Barbara adds emphasis to her statement by referring to her husband's shared view of such parents. She takes pride from her children having attended local state primary schools, and like Isabel, her articulation of choosing the independent sector is stated as in response to a particular dissatisfaction rather than a principled or positive choice. Both women are eager to present themselves as democratic and egalitarian. Their representations of the private sector acknowledge it as a sheltered place, and both resist judgement as being seen typical of that kind of parent.

For Barbara, the choice of a private education offers greater certainty of her children's progression to 'proper universities' followed by professional careers. It takes little imagination to reconcile Barbara's narrative with the portrait given in Ruth's, (her daughter's) account of

university decision-making. So, it is difficult to define Barbara's narrative as simply wanting adequacy. This is an account of how economic capital is converted to accrue social and cultural capital, and thus provide advantage. In Ball's terms, she has crossed the symbolic line from adequacy to advantage (2003). Yet, it does not follow that the advantage is at the direct detriment to others, and indeed, the comparisons used are the children of middle-class friends. Therefore, whilst it is possible to interpret Barbara as wanting advantage *over* others, to define this as exploitation in either intention or consequences is more difficult. Indeed, this distinction takes us to the heart of where Bourdieu's conceptual framework and the traditional class analysis agenda diverge, and these ideas will be explored further in the next, concluding chapter.

In contrast to Barbara's very clear expectations of Grayshott Grammar providing a route to what might be described as a middle-class career, Jackie's narrative conjured up the symbolism evoked by a private education. For her, Grayshott Grammar was meeting an aspiration, and as will be seen from the extracts below, her narrative had a dream-like quality. For Jackie, private education was a representation of something she saw for others, and something, although undefined, that she wanted for her only child.

Again, the reduction of narrative to orientation, complication and resolution offers insights about Jackie's habitus in relation to the field. Jackie's story begins with an emphasis on her daughter's childhood, with a long and detailed explanation of the educational choices made then, the occasional battles with teachers, and the recognition of her daughter's strengths in the 'liberal arts'. The complicating action can be seen as starting with Grayshott Grammar's open-day and a realisation that a private school education was perhaps attainable. The story's resolution was uncertain, and unlike with Barbara or Isabel, there was

no suggestion of a successful outcome or confirmation of a good decision having paid off. The outcome of this story was in her daughter's hands.

With its emphasis on her daughter, Jackie's narrative is characterised by selflessness and sacrifice. For her, private education represents giving her daughter an advantage. It is less about inadequate state provision, and instead about giving her daughter something she did not have. Juxtaposed with her daughter's opportunities were reflections about her own educational experience. Grayshott Grammar's open day prompted memories of childhood:

*When we went to the school, um you know, um the fear that came out for me was around funding because my income level, and me being a sole parent. The other issue I had was around um the feeling of the um...the differences in economic status, and how I was feeling about that...not the other individuals there, but how that was feeling for me. I felt quite intimidated by that to be honest with you, because I went to a state school growing up. I did not have the educational opportunities presented to me. I came from a working-class background, and was just the way it was.*

The open day triggers uncomfortable emotions. Jackie reflects on her working-class background and her position now as a single parent. Elsewhere in the narrative she describes herself as middle-class, which she defines in terms of her profession as a healthcare adviser. But here, in thinking about her first encounter at the sixth-form, she is reminded of her working-class roots and her 'economic status' relative to other parents. Jackie's narrative helps us understand how social class is understood and lived. Class is as much about who we are as about who

we are not. Perhaps class is not even thought about until the taken-for-granted or familiar is called into question and habitus collides with field.

Nevertheless, Jackie's articulation of class suggests that is something on which she has reflected. As Savage et al found, she has the cultural capital with which to talk about class (2001). However, in her assertion of a middle-class identity through becoming a healthcare professional, there are hints of an insecure and ambiguous class position. Her narrative reminds us of Bourdieu's insistence that class is a relational construct:

....the real is relational; reality is nothing other than the structure, as a set of constant relationships which are often invisible, because they are obscured by the realities of ordinary sense-experience.... (1987: 3).

Perhaps her recently acquired middle-class label is exposed and found lacking in its relationship to the symbols of class displayed by Grayshott Grammar. The ordinary experience has been disrupted and she is faced by the ostentation and affectations of a middle-class world which is on the one hand, accessible, but on the other, a millions miles away. As such, Jackie offers a compelling, real-life example of the inadequacies of occupational class labels. The progression from hotel receptionist to healthcare adviser does nothing to lessen the 'level of discomfort' when she enters the new environment of a fee-paying school. Describing Jackie as 'middle-class' eliminates the past, in one act of classification removing the nuances and complications of Jackie's life-history. Thus, in replacing social class with the concepts of habitus and field, we can see what these rather crude social class labels obscure.

For Jackie, the private school represents something that others were able to afford and that she desperately wanted for her daughter. Her

recollection of meeting Grayshott's headmaster suggests a fantasy or dreamlike quality to her view of the sixth-form:

*(The headmaster)...I was just so, um he seemed like something out of a movie or a book. He is so animated, and passionate, and I thought Pam deserves the best opportunity that is available out there. So that why I chose Grayshott.*

The meeting has realised an imagination of the special, exclusive world of a private school, and Jackie's decision is made in the desire for something intangible and indeterminate. The school offers something she conceives is somehow better, and something which is almost out of reach. Jackie's narrative conveys her coming into contact with the class-coded culture produced by Grayshott Grammar, with its headmaster a charismatic representation of everything she imagines to be offered by a private education.

For Jackie, although the narrative's emphasis is on her daughter, Grayshott Grammar provides a statement about herself. To be able to send her daughter to that school is to be seen as a successful parent. Unlike Isabel or Barbara, Jackie makes no attempt to convey her democratic principles. She feels no need to remind me that she is an egalitarian person. She has no need either to distinguish herself from the 'kind of parent who would rather lose their right arm' than send their child to state school. Quite simply, this is a narrative of using, but not being part of the private school. Jackie knows none of the parents she has seen at Grayshott; she is an outsider. At our meeting, by which time her daughter has been at the sixth-form for 18 months, she tells me she is someone who has 'kept (herself) pretty much removed'.

Jackie reminds us of the way in which class is defined spatially, with Grayshott's archway physically and symbolically creating a separation from the rest of the city.

### **'Those buildings...'**

The architecture of Grayshott Grammar provided a powerful metaphor for the women's description of its remote, initially unwelcoming atmosphere. Just as the newcomers to Grayshott Grammar had described being overawed, the women's accounts of first impressions convey a similar mix of excitement and trepidation. Jackie's narrative describes the most intensely articulated dissonance between habitus and field. The private school was unfamiliar and unexpected territory for all three women. Barbara's narrative conveys a sense of intimidation as she remembers her first visit:

*First impression. Scary, very scary, because I'd actually been to a state school myself, in Australia....and not a terribly good state school. We lived in a mixed area, where you tend to get council houses and bungalows and things, you know a kind of mixed environment. Whereas here you tend to get all the council houses in one environment. And it was scary. It was intimidating. Those buildings....and when you walked through the arch...it scared me to death!*

Like Jackie, encountering the school for the first time prompts reflections as far as Barbara's education was concerned. These first impressions lead her to talk about the area in which she grew up. Perhaps entering the archway for the first time is symbolic of entering a protected and privileged world. Her motivation for explaining she grew up in a 'mixed environment' can be interpreted as part of the overall

narrative theme. Barbara was keen to set herself apart from what she imagined were 'typical' fee-paying parents.

Reading the narratives through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, we can understand the women's educational decision-making as an amalgam of childhood, education and career trajectory. We can see the limitations and lack of sophistication offered by social class labels. Whilst all three women identified themselves as middle-class, their narratives were not expressing 'the unacknowledged normality' of the middle-classes (Savage 2003: 537). These were far from unacknowledged accounts of normality. Instead their accounts articulated an awareness of other forms of normality. These were the cautious, self-conscious educational practices of women who have not forgotten their working-class roots. Their narratives convey the complex and competing emotions of those who know there is something very 'particular' about middle-class normality.

Stories of choosing and leaving the private sector have offered insights into the habitus of women who were keen to express views on social inequalities. The women have talked about 'class', and they have alluded to the damage that class labels inflict. There was a sense of wanting the 'right' kind of middle-class identity, and resistance to, or separation from, middle-class parents viewed as a privileged group. In identifying themselves as middle-class, the women know that they have moved through a social space in which opportunities are unequally distributed. They know too that their children are better positioned than they were.



## Claiming (the right) middle-class identity?

The women's narratives provide interesting intersections with Savage et al's research on the resistance of class labels (2001). There are some clear resonances with the 'ambivalence' or 'defensiveness' found in that study. Nevertheless, all three spontaneously and willingly defined themselves as middle-class. Moreover, I suggest that this identity is actively claimed and acknowledged because of what they have *become*, and not what they always *were*. To be middle-class represents an escape from a childhood described as working-class. The women were proud to have become middle-class, and their working-class origins were described not with any hint of nostalgia, rather an obstacle overcome with stoicism. They talked about becoming 'middle-class' through career or marriage, and all three were keen to describe themselves in a way that reminds us of what Sayer has described as the 'heroic narrative in which the individual overcomes the injustice of a lowly class position and moves upwards by her own effort' (2002:6).

Their narratives remind us too that Bourdieu's concept of habitus is one that is subject to the myriad influences of individuals' family, friends and home. Taking us beyond the middle-class label that would otherwise be affixed to the three women, habitus urges us to look at their past, present and future trajectory. For example, Barbara's emphasis on education has developed in response to her aim to 'improve' herself having met and married a lawyer. Having left school at 16, she described feeling self-conscious about her lack of qualifications and she returned to study in her 30s, having recently been awarded a PhD. Consequently, the decisions she has made as a parent can be understood as reactions and responses to her own childhood. Barbara considers that her choice of private education identifies her as a good, caring middle-class mother.

Barbara's habitus has developed from the young girl who left school at 16, and the young woman who felt academically inadequate alongside her lawyer husband. Having returned to study and achieved a PhD, she has become 'educated', and yet her relationship to the field is not comfortable or easy. Nothing is left to chance and her narrative is characterised by effort, self-consciousness and a need to shore up her own narrative by reference to her husband's views. However, the narrative can also be read as one of pride in her own educational journey, which for Barbara has signified a transition from working-class girl to middle-class woman.

Similarly, for Isabel and Jackie, having studied for academic qualifications as adults, both articulate a strong and positive relationship to education. As such, their imagination of what is offered by Grayshott Grammar, can be understood as part and parcel of their own educational and social trajectory. It is therefore difficult to characterise the women's use of private education in straightforward terms of 'advantage', and in many ways their decision is more about 'compensating' or 'making up for' their own relatively disadvantaged childhoods.

Let me now look at what the narratives tell us about how these mothers deploy capital resources as they embark on the 'university project'.

### **The university project**

The previous chapter had identified the 'strategic and ambitious' students as investing considerable time and effort in their bid to secure a university place. Unlike those I had characterised by their effortless

progression from sixth-form to elite university, these were students for whom there were no assumptions and no attempt to conceal the labour behind their university application. With none of their mothers having gone to university as young women, and with only one of the fathers having a university education, (and this outside of the United Kingdom), these families were new to the field. As such, their children's university applications trigger anxieties. Their narratives articulate the 'worked at', and tireless efforts expended on the process. The rules of the field are unfamiliar, and their habitus is imperfectly aligned. Thus, in many ways they present a contradiction to the literature's dominant representation of middle-class parents. However, with the remainder of this chapter accentuating 'capital' rather than 'habitus', I want to highlight the considerable resources expended on the 'university project'.

The effort, planning and time spent on the 'university project' resonated with Reay's notion of 'emotional capital'. The investment into their children's future university destinations was evident as much by what was said, and what was so natural to be introduced as an afterthought. So whilst the women's narratives had revealed a dissonance between their habitus and the field of education, they described powerful capacities to support their children's university applications. If their dispositions were evocative of 'fish *out of water*', through the use and conversion of capitals they were able to bring together support and guidance from elsewhere. Their narratives were reminiscent of Devine's account of the normal, taken-for-granted actions of middle-class families (2004). That they would be researching university courses and taking their children to visits was part and parcel of good parenting. Their accounts bore little similarity to the dominant discourse of such behaviours as about deliberate boundary-making and exclusion.

Nevertheless, whilst in chapter two I highlighted the limitations of representing middle-class decision-making in binaries of advantage and

disadvantage, it would be wrong to overlook what is common to those whose capital positions them as advantaged in relative terms. If the women presented their own imperfect knowledge of the university application process, they were able to access information and guidance from elsewhere. As the following example shows, in Isobel's case, social capital was transferred to cultural capital. She describes her son's preparation for interview at Cambridge, and tells me that she wasn't involved 'because I didn't grow up in this country and there are some things that I don't necessarily know'. This remark reminds us of the contingent nature of capital. As a relative newcomer to this country, and although having acquired her own cultural capital through recent study, Isabel does not have knowledge of the university application process. Nevertheless, her cultural capital enables her to realise that she is not the best person to help her son, due to lacking the 'insider' knowledge of the system and its unspoken rules. She says:

*For the interview, his father helped him and he saw a couple of people who were, um either went to that university, um there was a gentleman who was an acquaintance, and he said, look if Richard wants to go to Cambridge I can help him with his interview'. Then there was his best friend's father and his friend's brother too. So he had all these four to help him.*

This reminds us that cultural capital may be acquired through social capital, and in this example, Isabel has sufficient social capital to enable her to draw on the most useful sources of information for her son. Deficiencies in her stock of cultural capital are made up for by knowledge and support from friends and acquaintances. Social capital is converted to cultural capital of a very specific kind, and Richard goes to his interview at Cambridge having gathered valuable informal information.

By contrast, Isabel's daughter rejects the informal information provided by Grayshott Grammar's headmaster. This example illustrates how capital is specific and contingent on field. Moreover, it problematizes the supposedly straightforward accumulation and utilisation of 'hot knowledge'. Ruth planned to apply to Newcastle, and the headmaster attempted to dissuade her:

He said she was mad to apply there, said they would give her an interview, just to be able to say they'd given her an interview because they don't like Grayshott Grammar students apparently. He told her that they'd give her an interview, but they were just going through the mill so they could tick her off, and tell people they had interviewed a private student, but she wouldn't get a place.

Barbara tells me her daughter rejects the advice and applies anyway, although Barbara said she was the only person to have done so. This example highlights the interrelationship between capital and field. The headmaster's 'hot knowledge' is in fact a caution to avoid a particular university because of suspected bias against privately-educated students. As such, he draws attention to the conditional value of cultural capital. Stocks of cultural capital are not straightforwardly converted to privilege. The UCAS application is described as fraught and tense, and a drama unfolds as Barbara explains time running out for Ruth as she struggles to make her final UCAS choices:

*So we were getting slightly desperate here....she'd talked about applying to Leicester, and of course my husband went 'Leicester! That's really not a very nice place!'....then (her sister) was back home and we knew that Ruth was having trouble with this last one and her sister sat down with the laptop one night and came up with Sheffield...so they went off on the train together and came*

*back and said Sheffield it is! So it was actually like a family effort, teamwork, although Ruth hated me being involved....I said it was because we all just care!*

This is a narrative about the messiness of family life, of the conflicts and tensions emerging from the desire to help a younger daughter make a difficult choice. Decision-making is haphazard and subjective, with the advice from an older sister being more acceptable perhaps than that offered by parents or school. Nevertheless, for Ruth there is a wealth of information and indeed a choice as to whose advice she will take. Although a far from easy process, it stands in sharp contrast with those middle-class students I described in the last chapter as 'aspiring and vocationally-specific'. Whilst Ruth's mother conveys the anxiety and tensions which rise to the surface, these are played out in an environment which is replete with cultural and economic capital.

The dynamics of family life take on a very different rhythm for single-parent Jackie. The application process is described as a close collaboration between mother and daughter, and Jackie talks with certainty about which universities would be attractive options for her daughter. Choices are narrowed, and the final five have been determined after working through brochures and making visits. In common with both Isabel and Barbara, Jackie was not educated in the United Kingdom, and this time through work colleagues, she is able to acquire cultural capital in the form of specific knowledge about the subject her daughter, Pam is considering. Jackie tells me she has arranged for 'two teacher friends' to chat to her daughter about the different kinds of degree programmes her daughter might want to consider. Thus, for Jackie, social capital is transferred to cultural capital for her daughter, and serves to compensate for her own lack of knowledge. However, in the end, Jackie tells me her daughter has decided to take a gap year to travel with a boyfriend. So, for Jackie, the

promise offered by Grayshott Grammar begins to fade. Her narrative ends on a rather pessimistic note, with a worry that her daughter will drift out of education.

## **Conclusions**

Through its narrative form, the interview has provided me the fullest and most dynamic picture of decision-making, and a representation which would otherwise find no place within more closely-structured methods. The narrative data I have explored here exposes the complexities and multi-dimensional nature of educational decision-making. The mothers' stories provided insights into the lives of middle-class families who in Barbara's words, 'move their children on'. Indeed, behind the claims for 'adequacy', the narratives articulate a realisation that private education is perceived as giving an advantage. Furthermore, it is understood as the most visible means of advantaging your child, and an invitation to be labelled as 'pushy'.

These are the mothers of those students I described as 'strategic and ambitious'; their stories are filled with evidence of how class is worked at and 'made'. In some ways, these mothers illustrate the 'unacknowledged normality' observed by Savage (2003), and yet in others, there is a stark reminder that this is far from normal. These 'middle-class' labels threaten to hide what the habitus reveals is a more uncomfortable relationship with the middle-class stronghold of education. Nevertheless, for all three mothers, education was the vehicle that ultimately took them from working-class childhood to middle-class parenthood. Education was revered, perhaps even worshipped.

The mothers' stories provide an interesting parallel to those of the students, yet they also offer something far more. As narratives crisscrossed between their own and their children's education, I was

surprised by the richness of data. Their interest in talking about their own working-class backgrounds, and in particular, their limited educational opportunities, was suggestive of an attempt to resist a middle-class label. Yet, at the same time, all three made claims to be middle-class. In defining themselves as middle-class whilst telling me they had not always been 'that', was indicative of the continued salience of class labels.

Furthermore, their use of the vocabulary of class was significant. With my not having referred to class explicitly, I was taken aback by the way in which class was introduced in the narratives. The mothers' keenness to engage in what Sayer describes as the 'embarrassing' subject of class (2002) was suggestive of its continued power. Although the women declared themselves middle-class, they aligned themselves to a particular version of middle-classness. To be middle-class was perceived by Barbara as opening yourself to accusations of 'moving your children on', and for Isabel, perhaps her advice to her son might be rewritten to say '*middle-class* people can still be nice people.' On the other hand, for Jackie, there was no doubt she saw her profession and education as having changed her 'class', but she continued to distinguish herself from the class-coded culture at Grayshott Grammar.

The women's narratives offered powerful contradictions to the dominant representation of middle-class mothers. Where the classed practices literature has a tendency to focus on the present and future ambitions of middle-class mothers, very little is known about their past. As such, their middle-class label is one that masks the more complex understanding revealed through habitus. The women in this chapter are not evocative of the dominant representation of middle-class women who have known nothing other than belonging to the 'particular-universal' class. Instead, they remain out of step, sensitive to having



'moved their children on', and wanting to be seen as 'nice, middle-class people'.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

This chapter draws together the findings from across the thesis. The central concern of the thesis was, through the particular example of educational decision-making, to explore the problems and gaps in the way that Bourdieu has been used so far to understand classed practices. With this main endeavour guiding the development of subsidiary questions, and with my empirical research generating still further questions, the thesis offers a contribution to not only educational classed practices research, but the classed practices programme more broadly conceived. The structure of this concluding chapter will be developed from the following main conclusions, which are summarised below:

- The classed practices literature offers an overly-homogenous representation of middle-class educational practices.
- The trilogy of habitus, capital and field allows us to pierce through the vaguely-defined concepts of confidence and privilege which characterise the representation of middle-class practice.
- Working within the framework of habitus, capital and field enables us to deconstruct overly crude class labels.
- Through giving greater attention to the role of the educational institution, and in this case, the two sixth-forms, we can understand individual practice as mediated by institution and moreover, its position in the field.

- The concept of 'institutional doxa', rather than 'institutional habitus', gives us a way to understand the active construction of institutional position in the field.
- Bourdieu's interpretation of 'gift-exchange' provides insights into the symbolic dimension of classed practices. Furthermore, it captures the fuzzy logic of practice rather than the frequently asserted deliberate and calculative strategy.
- In alluding to middle-class parents' practices in the language of exploitation and conflict the literature defines those terms very broadly. Furthermore, we risk confusing and conflating classed outcomes with classed practices.
- The assertion of a normal, ordinary identity is evidence of the enduring and compelling potential of class to incur judgement.

The chapter will discuss and further elaborate these findings. In addition, I will consider how they contribute to the development of the classed practices programme. Principally, the findings of this thesis offer a more nuanced account of middle-class educational practices. Moreover, through the attempt to preserve the uncertain, faltering nature of practice, I have refocused attention from successful outcomes to the unfolding of processes over time. My research therefore adds new layers of complexity to the dominant, binary model of educational practice defined by an advantaged middle-class opposed to a disadvantaged working-class. Indeed, the thesis has opened up space between these two extremes, and where Bourdieu notes:

....the fuzziness of the relationship between practices and positions are greatest..... the room left open for symbolic

strategies designed to jam this relationship is the largest (1987: 12)

Before plunging into the detailed conclusions, I would like to make some more general observations. Indeed, the points which are articulated below inform the overall conclusions of the thesis. As such, these broader principles have been developed from the more detailed and specific findings around which this concluding chapter is organised. The principles should not be read as an attempt to prescribe an inflexible interpretation of Bourdieu. However, my argument is that if Bourdieu is to be used as a 'key resource' (Ball: 2003), and as much as his concepts are 'adaptable to specific empirical contexts rather than general models or rigid frameworks' (Reay: 2004: 75), we must not lose sight of the important principles which underpin his logic of practice. The following section explores these principles, after first returning to the conclusions of the literature reviews.

### **Working within Bourdieu's framework of habitus, capital and field**

The conclusions from my empirical research bring us back to the theoretical context out of which Bourdieu's contribution to class analysis developed, and the way in which his ideas have been put into practice. I want therefore to return to the conclusions to chapters one and two. In chapter one, I discussed how amidst claims for the 'death of class', the conceptual framework of habitus, capital and field provided a more dynamic means to explain how class is lived and experienced. With what had been commonly referred to as the sterility and unproductiveness of class analysis, and especially with that programme having become pre-occupied with labels and boxes, Bourdieuan concepts were seized upon as a means to explore the classed nature of everyday life. Furthermore, in an intellectually adroit manoeuvre, the

evocation of 'ordinariness' was offered as evidence for the power of 'class' without the need for explicit class identification. Chapter one concluded that more work needed to be done to probe behind the ordinary behaviours which nevertheless resulted in persistent class inequalities.

The field of education continues to provide a pivotal scene in which classed inequalities are played out. With the expansion of higher education, and in particular the multiple meanings and outcomes from 'going to university', participation was nevertheless structured by social class ([www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk); bespoke data provided by UCAS). Despite government discourse and the policy rhetoric of widening participation, there were early signs of acknowledgement of the field of higher education offering uneven benefits. The correlations between a degree and its promise in the labour market were being called into question, and so in chapter two, I argued that the field of education, and in particular the preponderance of middle-class students in elite universities, offered the background in which to explore the practices of parents and students.

Thus, with education as a key site in which to explore classed practices, the dominant model developed by Stephen Ball, Diane Reay et al has flourished, and indeed, they have developed the agenda. So, the power and influence of their model of classed practices is undeniable, and without it my own questions could not be framed. In particular, the binary model of educational classed practices continues to shape the field, providing a dominant reference. The model of educational classed practices has provided an insightful and keenly-observed treatment of class beyond the formal, public settings of the workplace. It allows us to find new sites in which 'class' happens. Above all, it draws our attention to the way in which classed advantages are actively reproduced through what are very ordinary behaviours and decisions.

As Ball points out, we were previously 'looking in the wrong place, looking both too hard and not hard enough' (2003: 177). Instead of searching for class consciousness and identification with a collective class identity, the classed practices programme has appropriated Bourdieu to argue for the existence of class through the classed nature of apparently ordinary individual practices and tastes.

However, as much as Bourdieu's conceptual framework is cited as having inspired the development of a classed practices agenda, it is not always clear that Bourdieu would necessarily recognise or wholeheartedly welcome this acknowledgement. Despite its claims, the educational classed practices agenda provides only a limited interpretation of Bourdieu's framework. Indeed, I would go as far as saying it is a misappropriation of Bourdieu. Let me point to two specific, but in many ways related problems with how the educational classed practices agenda has engaged with Bourdieu. In its inadequate treatment of the following principles, the approach becomes Bourdieuan in name and without substance. If Bourdieu is to be used and claimed as a key influence, there is a need first, to work with his concepts as part of an integrated framework; and second, to avoid neglecting the practical logic which guides practice.

In the discussion that follows, my aim is to demonstrate how the dominant educational classed practices programme has been advanced from what is only a partial working of Bourdieu, and as such, has failed to realise the full potential offered by classed practices research. This is not to argue that Bourdieu's conceptual framework has to be accepted uncritically, or indeed to claim that he offers an unproblematic and straightforward means to address 'class'. On the contrary, my own attempts to put his concepts to practical use have illuminated their flaws, limitations and ambiguities. The promise offered on 'paper' does not always translate to empirical reality. Nevertheless, in neglecting to

follow these two very important principles, there is a danger that educational classed practices has attached Bourdieuan vocabulary to research which is difficult to reconcile with his sociological endeavour. Thus, in drawing together the conclusions from my research, I show how in engaging more closely with Bourdieu's underlying principles, that a more nuanced representation of practice, and one that moves beyond the binary labels of class, will distinguish itself more clearly from traditional class analysis.

### **An interrelated framework**

To work with Bourdieu's concepts in what I have described as a 'pick and mix' approach is to miss the important interconnections and relationships. With its emphasis on 'habitus' or 'capital' in isolation to 'field', the tendency is for classed practices research to offer only a limited understanding of the Bourdieuan framework. To treat concepts individually is to forget that each concept has meaning in relation to another. Moreover, each concept is dependent on the others. For example, the volume and type of capital possessed by an individual must be understood in relation to the dominant capital of the field within which that capital is being deployed. Thus, in my attempt to work with Bourdieu's concepts relationally, I have accented their specific and contingent nature. In directing the research lens more closely towards field, I am acknowledging the significance of each concept's contribution towards an understanding of practice. For example, the field of higher education and the sixth-form institutions' relationship to that field are essential to an understanding of the individual practices within it.

Thus, the correspondence between individual and field is what *generates* the logic of practice. So, in neglecting that both individual

and field can only be understood in relation to each other, and with each *shaping* the other, we see just a partial account of practice. Therefore with my attempt to keep field, capital and habitus in tension, my intention is to define how practices become logical, reasonable and natural.

## **The logic of practice**

As I argued in chapter two, the educational classed practices literature represented middle-class parents' and students' behaviours as characterised by strategy and deliberation. With the emphasis on middle-class students' successful outcomes, and their parents determined interventions, there was very little sense of practice as mediated by the haphazard and somewhat fuzzy workings of the habitus. Despite being framed within the vocabulary of 'habitus', this was difficult to reconcile with the dominant representations of the middle-class.

In effect, educational practices were taken out of the time and place in which they occurred, and as such the practical and immediate logic that shapes practice is replaced by strategy. So, to emphasise strategic intention is to remove the practical sense which guides practice. Moreover, the mediating function of the habitus is underplayed. Thus, despite its claims to emphasise practice, there is a tendency for the literature to accentuate the eventual and predominantly successful educational outcomes of the middle-class. In this way, their practice, its uncertainties, false starts and anxieties are virtually written out of the model. As Bourdieu states:

Even in cases where the agents' habitus are perfectly harmonized and the interlocking of actions and reactions is totally predictable



*from outside*, uncertainty remains as to the outcome of the interaction as long as the sequence has not been completed....This uncertainty, which finds its objective basis in the probabilist logic of social laws, is sufficient to modify not only the experience of practice... (Bourdieu 1977: 9).

Thus, from the perspective of time and distance, educational practices assume a certainty and assurance which is not necessarily the experience at the time. By neglecting that space between practice and eventual outcome we risk reducing individuals to representations of their class structure.

Having identified what I consider to be some very fundamental problems which characterise the classed practices programme of research in education, I will now return to the findings articulated at the beginning of this chapter. I will consider how each contributes to the deconstructive endeavour of this thesis, and how these findings are characterised by an emphasis on *practice* over *class outcomes*.

### **Using the trilogy of habitus, capital and field to pierce through the vaguely-defined concepts of confidence and privilege which characterise the representation of middle-class practice**

With the binary model having established extremes of working class disadvantage and middle-class privilege, rather little was known about the subjective dimensions of middle-class decision-making. As such, there was a tendency for middle-class students to be represented as a privileged contrast to working-class disadvantage. We knew little beyond their different, and undeniably more successful educational outcomes. The trilogy of habitus, capital and field allows us to deconstruct the vague and sociologically unhelpful concepts of

confidence and privilege. In doing so, we can dissect practices more closely to provide a more nuanced understanding of middle-class practices.

Although the literature makes considerable reference to the Bourdieuan notion of middle-class students having a superior 'feel for the game', there is insufficient attention to how that 'feel for the game' is developed. Moreover, the 'feel for the game' is reduced to their acquisition of 'hot knowledge', with the emphasis on how the middle-class students have access to better quality, 'insider' information with which to construct their university choices. With the concept of habitus a crucial and indeed fundamental component of Bourdieu's sociological endeavour, the tendency to represent middle-class students' decision-making through their capital accumulations leave little room for the emotional dimensions of practice. Indeed, the subjective dimensions of middle-class decision-making are virtually eliminated. Thus, with the binary model's emphasis on how middle-class students deploy their superior stocks of capital, it deals inadequately with how such decisions articulate the subjective dimensions of class. In effect, middle-class young people are reduced to embodiments of their parents' capital, and the assumption is that these higher volumes of capital, and especially 'hot knowledge' engender a better understanding of university status and hierarchies.

Consequently, the decision-making appears rational and planned, and with the emotions consigned to the realm of working-class decision-making. It is in such accounts where the concept of habitus is most fully and effectively utilised to explain the feelings of discomfort and awkwardness. This raises questions as to whether Bourdieu's sociology is better able to articulate the perspective of the 'outsider'. It is certainly from this perspective that those who have used his concepts have developed the most convincing and fully-rounded accounts of

practice. Certainly in their representation of the middle-class through educational decision making, the literature is dominated by an assumed straightforward and uncomplicated relationship to the field of higher education.

Therefore, in my proposal of a three-way model of middle-class decision-making, my aim is to work more closely with habitus as a way to reintroduce the emotional dimensions of middle-class practice. I argue that the 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. Furthermore, in considering how those middle-class students' decisions are characterised by access to high-quality 'insider' knowledge, we reached the limits of the conceptual usefulness of capital. It was unable to adequately explain the vague and subtle way in which students were positioned in proximity to the field of elite universities. 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. As such, the 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.

### **Individual practice as mediated by the institution and its position in the field. Middle-class students and the fee-paying sector: an easy correspondence?**

It is difficult to reconcile the students' narratives of life in Grayshott Grammar with the dominant representation of middle-class, privately-educated students as characterised by 'double privilege'. The stories

provided by Grayshott Grammar's newcomers offer contradictions and complications to the usual depiction of such educational practices as embodying confidence and entitlement. Their narratives ask us to rethink how we understand the fee-paying school, and above all, to question commonly-made assumptions of its homogenously middle-class population. Instead, and as so powerfully illustrated through the students' ability to define a 'typical' Grayshott Grammar student, the private school may be better understood as a site for the production of middle-class codes and symbols.

Furthermore, and in contrast to Savage's assertion that working 'classness' has become simply a foil against which to construct an individualised middle-class (2000), we can see too that grossly-made assumptions about 'us' and 'them' are made through distance and detachment within classes. Thus in educational classed practices research, it is tempting to see the privately-educated, middle-class students as offering little more than a background against which to explore the more challenging and troubled trajectories of the working-class young people. Consequently, the narratives of joining Grayshott Grammar shed light on a more fragmented environment of a private school. It is perhaps all too easy to be guided by the more obvious symbols of privilege, and indeed the private school is of little interest to those whose intention is governed by a sole agenda to address disadvantage. Clearly, there are worse experiences than being called 'stuck up' or 'la-di-dah'! Nevertheless, these students' insights provide an up-close perspective, and one which disrupts a common tendency to 'write off' the private sector as something too obvious as to be unworthy of investigation. Those dominant and potent representations of class provide a mirror against which to reveal the more subtle and restrained representations of middle-class practice. Thus, in providing those visible and ostentatious versions of middle-class, Grayshott

Grammar's newcomers remind us of the breadth and variety of those we define as middle-class.

### **Using Bourdieu's concept of 'doxa' to correct the neglect of the organisation, and its place in the field.**

In accordance with my intention to work with Bourdieu's concepts relationally, the thesis devotes more attention to his notion of 'field' than is otherwise seen in the classed practices literature. To emphasise habitus and capital without at the same time interlinking those concepts to the field, is to produce an imbalanced account of practice. Therefore, to direct the research lens towards field acknowledges the contingent, dependent nature of each concept in Bourdieu's trilogy. In particular, my research accents the specific role of the educational institution in shaping students' understanding of university choices. The concept of field enables Grayshott Grammar and Winterbourne College to be positioned according to the correspondence of their capital to the field of higher education.

Furthermore, a focus on how students' and parents' practices take place in the aftermath of an expanded and diversified higher education provision, and enables us to understand practices as bound up with their wider social and political context. By employing Bourdieu's conceptual tools to deconstruct the field of higher education we can see how the vocabulary associated with 'going to university' serves to conceal its variable meanings and outcomes. Thus, students' decisions are caught up within the politically and socially constructed hierarchy of universities.

Through the notion of 'institutional doxa' Grayshott Grammar can be seen as creating a taste for national, research-led institutions, whilst

Winterbourne College endorses a preference for regional universities across a range of research and modern institutions. In the two sixth-forms' very different distributions of students across the higher education field we are encouraged to look at the way that institutional doxa are created. With my focus on Grayshott Grammar, and through the considerable exposure to that organisation, I was able to explore how it constructed its very distinctive position in relation to the field of elite universities. Its ability to narrow students' A-level and university choices was bound up in its production of cultural capital. Moreover, in its conversion of that cultural capital to a commonly understood hierarchy of particular subjects and universities, Grayshott Grammar is engaged in producing and displaying the symbolic dimensions of class.

As such, Grayshott Grammar fosters a relationship with parents, which obscures the reality of their financial transaction. Through Bourdieu's reworking of 'gift-exchange', we can see beyond the mechanics of this financial transaction, and instead look to the vague and illusory nature of the promise offered by Grayshott Grammar. To define the relationship between fee-paying institution and parents through the Bourdieuan notion of gift-exchange is to therefore draw our attention to what is said and equally, what is left unsaid. Moreover, with the introduction of 'time' and 'imagination', the expectations and ultimate return on the investment of school fees is dissolved through the suspension of reality. The expectations from a private education are held in the realm of fantasy and illusion, in the suggestions and hints which are offered at parents' evenings. To send your child to Grayshott Grammar is to buy into its displays of a particular middle-class coded culture, and perhaps it is to collude in the pretence that it is no longer 'an academic hothouse'.

## **Defining middle-class parents' practices through the language of exploitation and conflict**

Whether educational practices can be defined through the language of exploitation and conflict draws us into the difficult and sensitive domain of intentions and principles. I have argued that educational classed practices literature has a tendency to emphasise the successful outcomes rather than the practices of the middle-class. With this emphasis, there is insufficient attention given to the often haphazard and faltering practical logic of their practices. Thus, the literature introduces deliberate, strategic intentions, through the conceptual tools of habitus and capital. Moreover, the middle-class parents and tacitly, the young middle-class, are depicted through language which sometimes hints, and sometimes more clearly articulates the exploitative nature of their practices.

There is, according to Bottero (2004; 2005), a problem with the classed practices agenda continuing to be articulated through such language. For Bottero (*ibid*) there is a sense that the classed practices programme has failed to shake off the concerns of traditional class analysis. With her contention that there has been 'slippage' between old and new versions of class, and with the concerns of 'old' class analysis on exploitation and conflict, she argues that these 'sit uncomfortably with the more diffuse and implicit classed processes of culturalist class analysis' (2004: 991). Whether classed practices can be described through a vocabulary of exploitation asks us to confront some fundamental issues, and in doing so takes us back to Pakulski and Waters' assertion of the 'notoriously vague and tenuously stretched' nature of class (1996).

Bottero thus asks us to separate 'objectionable outcomes' from 'unobjectionable practices', and we are once again caught up in the tricky domain of principles and ethics. As I discussed in relation to the findings in chapters five and eight, it is difficult to define the practice of using private education as deliberately exploitative. The unequal outcomes from using private education are clearly evidenced, however, to classify parents' use of private education as an exploitative practice risks conflating those outcomes with parents' intentions. Therefore, to define the decision to use a fee-paying school as exploitative is to considerably broaden what is meant by exploitation as part of the lexicon of traditional class analysis.

Even removed from its 'class' roots, the more commonplace understanding of exploitation as bound up with taking advantage or manipulation is difficult to reconcile with the hazy logic of parents' practice. I conclude that the decision to use private education is cloaked in the spectacle; the vision offered by the headmaster. This is the very symbolism of class, which seen through Bourdieu's interpretation of 'gift exchange' offered a way to understand the nature of the relationship between parents and Grayshott Grammar. This was one characterised by the hints, suggestions and symbols of middle-class culture. Whilst there was no doubt these parents were buying into the dream of a middle-class career, this was a vision introduced and nurtured by Grayshott Grammar. There was little evidence of these parents behaving in the calculated or strategic manner in which they are represented in educational classed practices literature. Nevertheless, they were consuming the product offered by Grayshott Grammar, and in doing so, marking out their children as special.

Perhaps then, we can replace the notions of exploitation and conflict with the Bourdieuan concept of symbolic violence. As Bourdieu says:



...the full importance of the classification struggles that are waged through the medium of lifestyle becomes clear as soon as we recognise that before there can be any kind of 'class conflict' (in the familiar sense of the term), symbolic processes must first transpire in which the relevant collectivities are demarcated from one another – that is, in which each identifies itself and its opponent(s) (Bourdieu 1990b 138).

Class conflict within a Bourdieuan framework is characterised by struggles for legitimacy and for the right to classify others. These are not once and for all classifications, but on-going and shifting lines that demarcate the 'us' and the 'them'. This takes us back to one of the most fundamental differences between Bourdieu and more traditional conceptions of class. He emphasises that class is not ready made in objective reality, rather class boundaries are made and remade by continual processes of classification.

Thus, through the concept of symbolic violence, we are provided with a way to understand how class relationships are played out through practices and all that they signify. The relationship between parents and Grayshott Grammar pivots on the institutional construction and consumption of symbolic capital. Through sending their children to Grayshott Grammar, the parents are engaged in a process of classification of selves and others. The practice of paying for a private education is difficult to reconcile with exploitative intent, but it is nevertheless constitutive of the use of economic and symbolic power. To choose a private education is to define parent and child as different, and to draw lines so vividly captured through accounts of walking under the archway.

Perhaps it is here, in the interpretation of exploitation, that educational classed practices needs to engage more closely with the broader

programme of research which has drawn from Bourdieu. For example, as Skeggs proposes, to explore:

...the fragility and vulnerability of the middle-class self-formation, which has to be continually asserted to be enabled to operate as a form of powerful difference and worthy of moral authority (in Devine, Savage, Scott and Crompton 2005 (Eds): 67)

So, as I have discussed, if the decision to use private education was difficult to define as exploitative intention, it was about delineating and distinguishing. Moreover, decisions to use private education were articulations of their having become members of the 'particular-universal' middle-class, and distancing themselves from their once working-class selves. To send their children to private school is part and parcel of their own trajectory through social space. The ability to pay for private education symbolises that trajectory, and at the same time, defines those mothers on the one hand as 'pushy' and on the other hand as 'good parents'. Thus, the mothers' narratives illustrated how the middle-classes 'move their children on', and as such advantage their children over others. If their practice is to be considered as a form of exploitation, then it is to disrupt the associations of middle-class behaviour with good parenting, responsibility and self-reliance. It is to deem as exploitative the actions of the middle-classes characterised by the individual and self-governance.

Therefore, whilst I found that Ball's notion of 'advantage over adequacy' provided a helpful means to conceptualise such practices, we nevertheless entered the difficult terrain of intentions, ethics and principles. Hence, I did not find that the choice of private education or the interventions with university decision-making were constitutive of deliberate exploitation or conflict, but they are examples of the way that the economic, cultural and social capital is used to provide vaguely

articulated and poorly-defined advantage. Perhaps then these are new ways of interpreting exploitation, and all the more powerful because their economic basis is disguised through the cultural and social worlds. Savage labels the working class as 'eviscerated' (2003); they are written out of the game, double losers, who are not only unable to play, but chastised for failure too. The middle classes have successfully monopolised 'good citizenship', with class interest denied as universal and readily available to all. However, the middle class practices I heard articulated signalled no deliberate, conscious attempt to exploit, and if it is to be described as such, then the concept of exploitation must be redefined so it is freed from morals and ethics.

Furthermore, to articulate such classed practices as exploitative is to talk about class in terms of the class labels used in its traditional lexicon. As such, the notion of an exploitative middle-class whose practices are represented in opposition to a disadvantaged working class is a failure to embrace all that is offered by Bourdieu's conceptual framework. For example, to reduce the three mothers to their middle-class label is to overlook that their practice is generated from their movement through social space. To fail to move beyond the middle-class label is to disregard the emotions generated by habitus. Furthermore to label the women as middle-class is to have only a partial understanding of their place in relation to the field of education. As such, the use of in-depth narrative data provided ways to understand classed practices beyond the labels of class which tend to smooth over the interesting creases, and suggest uniformity where there is diversity.

Thus, to use habitus, capital and field to dig beneath their middle-class tags allows us to expose the complicated and powerful legacy of class. That the mothers were eager to claim a middle-class identity was evidence of the desire to be seen as having become something else. Indeed, their assertion of middle-classness was a claim to becoming

ordinary, but in a very particular way. The middle-class identity was articulated, and yet at the same time, it was being claimed within carefully staked parameters. The women wanted to assert an ordinary middle-class identity, and whilst distancing themselves from working-class roots, the middle-class label would be less easy to claim without it.

## **New questions?**

This thesis began with Pakulski and Waters' allegation as to the 'vague and tenuously stretched' nature of concept of class (1996), and it concludes with a reluctant but unequivocal agreement. Bourdieu has driven a new approach to class analysis, and the focus on practice offers a strong contradiction to those who deny the relevance of class inequalities. Whereas Crompton and Scott argued that Bourdieu's influence 'neither replaces or significantly improves' the 'older and more straightforward approaches' (2005) recently, Crompton has devoted considerable space to Bourdieu as part of her comprehensive account of class (2008). This is recognition of Bourdieu's contribution having been more widely acknowledged and embedded within the genre.

Yet, it is difficult to argue that the classed practices agenda has found its place in relation to traditional class analysis. To really move forward then, whilst I do not follow Bottero's call for a 'fundamental break', I think there is a need to adopt a vocabulary which better conveys Bourdieu's approach to class. Operating within a Bourdieuan paradigm, classed practices research captures above all, the inherent struggles which structure our lives. Nevertheless, the vocabulary of 'exploitation' and 'conflict' is unnecessary and out of place within a Bourdieuan understanding of class. Moreover, the use of 'exploitation' carries with it the full weight of Marxist class analysis, and which retains enduring symbolic currency. So, in the place of exploitation and conflict,

'symbolic violence' conveys how class privilege is enacted and reproduced through a Bourdieuan lens. From this perspective we can understand how meanings and judgements are imposed on 'others', and which are so fundamental to Bourdieu's project.

That inequalities are reproduced by classed practices is not denied. However, in the educational classed practices literature, there is a worrying tendency towards judgement and the essentialising, perhaps even *demonising* of middle-class parents. Moreover, the educational classed practices agenda is currently *driven by*, rather than informing policy. As such, it is an agenda which is bound by a motivation to expose stark differences rather than shade in the more subtle details. We know little about those caught between the extremes. Whilst the young people could be classified as middle-class through their parents' occupations, the diversity of their practices asks us to question the usefulness of this label. Beyond saying these young people are not *working class*, their practices are difficult to reconcile with the uniform representation in the educational classed practices literature. The dominant binary model fails to capture the very in-betweenness and diversity of their practices. To find a way to articulate and expose the way in which class outcomes are produced asks us to recognise these dimensions of middle-class practice. Indeed, it is to disrupt the binary model which reduces middle-class practice to caricatured confidence and entitlement. Instead, class practices, if they are to reveal more than class outcomes, must capture the practical logic through which it is generated.

## References

Allatt, P (1993) 'Becoming Privileged: The Role of Family Processes', in I. Bates and G. Riseborough (eds) *Youth and Inequality*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Archer, L., Hutchings M, & Ross A (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: issues of exclusion and inclusion* London: RoutledgeFalmer

Baker, S & Brown, B (2007) 'Images of Excellence Constructions of Institutional Prestige and University Choice Process' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* Vol 28. No. 3 pp 377-391

Ball, S J (2003) *Class Strategies and the Education Market: the middle-classes and social advantage* London: RoutledgeFalmer

Ball, S J., Davies, J., Reay, D and David M (2002) 'Classification and judgement: social class and the cognitive structures of choice in higher education' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23(1) 51-72

Beck, U (1992) *Risk Society* London: Sage

Bernstein, B. (1996) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity. Theory, Research, Critique* London: Taylor and Frances

Bottero, W (2004) 'Class Identities and the Identity of Class' *Sociology* Vol 38. (5) 985-1003

Bottero, W (2005) *Stratification: social division and inequality* London: RoutledgeFalmer

Bourdieu, P (1977) *An Outline of a Theory of Practice* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Bourdieu, P (1984) *Distinction* New York: Harvard,

Bourdieu, P (1986) Forms of Capital in *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Sociology of Education* (2004) Oxon: Sage

Bourdieu, P (1987) 'What makes a Social Class? On the theoretical and practical existence of groups.' *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*: 32 1:8

Bourdieu, P (1990) *In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology* Cambridge: Polity

Bourdieu, P (1990b) *The Logic of Practice* Cambridge: Polity Press

Bourdieu, P (1998) *Practical Reason* Stanford University Press

Bourdieu, P (1999) *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*: Cambridge Polity

Bourdieu, P (2004) *In Other Words* Cambridge: Polity Press

Bourdieu, P & Wacquant, L (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Bourdieu, P and Boltanski, L (2000) *Changes in social structure and changes in the demand for education*, in S J Ball (ed) *Sociology of Education; Major Themes, Volume 2, Inequalities and Oppressions* London: RoutledgeFarmer

Brooks, R. (2005) *Friendship and Educational Choice: peer influence and planning for the future* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Brown P, Lauder, H (2006) 'Globalisation, knowledge and the myth of the magnet economy' *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4 pp25-57

Brown, P. & Hesketh, A (2004) *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability, Competition and Careers in the Knowledge-Driven Economy* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Brown, P., Halsey, A H., Lauder, H., Stuart Wells A, (1997), 'The transformation of education and society: an introduction', in *Education: Culture, Economy, Society* Eds Halsey, AH, Lauder, H, Brown P & Stuart Wells A (Oxford University Press, Oxford) pp 1-44

Cappelli, P (1995) 'Rethinking employment' *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 33, 4, 563-602

Coffey, A (2001) *Education and Social Change* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Coffey, A & Atkinson, P (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data* London: Sage

Crompton, R (1998) *Class and Stratification* Cambridge: Polity

Crompton, R (2008) *Class and Stratification* Cambridge: Polity

Crossley, N (2000) *The social body: habit, identity and desire* London: Sage



Crozier, G., Reay, D., James, D., Jamieson, F., Beedell, P., Hollingworth, S & Williams, K (2008) 'White middle-class parents, identities, educational choice and the urban comprehensive school: dilemmas, ambivalence and moral ambiguity' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29: 3 261-272

Davis, P & Freedland, M (1993) *Labour Legislation and Public Policy* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Devine, F (1998) *Class Analysis and the Stability of Class Relations* Sociology Vol 32.

Devine, F (2004) *Class Practices: How Parents help their Children get good jobs* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Devine F, Savage, M, Scott, J & Crompton R (2005) *Rethinking Class: Culture, identity and Lifestyles* Basingstoke: Palgrave

Elliot, J (2005) *Using Narratives in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Data* London: Sage

Erikson, R & J Goldthorpe (1993) *The Constant Flux* New York: Oxford University Press

Finch, J (1984) 'It's great to have someone to talk to: the ethics and politics of interviewing women'. (In C Bell and H Roberts (eds) *Social Researching: Politics, Production and Practice* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Giddens, A (1991) *Modernity and self identity : self and society in the late modern age* Cambridge: Polity

Goldthorpe, J H., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F & Platt, J (1968a) *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Goldthorpe, J H., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer F & Platt J (1968b) *The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Goldthorpe, J H., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer F & Platt J (1969) *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Goldthorpe, J. (1995) *The Service Class revisited in T Butler and M Savage (eds) Social Change and the Middle Classes* London: UCL Press

Grenfell, M & James, D (Eds.) (1998) *Bourdieu and education: acts of practical theory* London: Falmer Press

Grenfell, M (2004) *Pierre Bourdieu: Agent Provocateur* London: Continuum International Press

Gubrium, J & Holstein, J (1997) *The New Language of Qualitative Method* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hodkinson, P (1997). 'Career Decision Making and the Transition from School to Work'. In: Grenfell, M. and James, D. (1998) *Bourdieu and Education*. London: Falmer Press.

Jenkins, R (1992) *Pierre Bourdieu* London: Routledge

Kumar, K (1995) From Post-industrial to Post-modern society in Brown, P., Halsey, A H., Lauder, H., Stuart Wells A, (1997), 'The transformation

of education and society: an introduction', in *Education: Culture, Economy, Society* Eds Halsey, A H., Lauder, H, Brown P & Stuart Wells, A Oxford: Blackwells

Stuart Wells A (Oxford University Press, Oxford)

Labov, W & Waletzky, J (1967) *Narrative analysis* In J. Helm (ed.), *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts* Seattle: University of Washington Press pp 12-44

Lareau, A, & Weininger, E. B. (2003) 'Cultural Capital in Educational Research: A Critical Assessment'. *Theory and Society*, 567-606.

Lash, S & J, Urry (1994) *Economies of Signs and Space* London: Sage

Lawler, S (2005) *Introduction to Class, Culture and Identity* Sociology Volume 39 (5)

Lockwood, D (1958) *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness*. London: Allen and Unwin

Machin, S. and A. Vignoles (2005) (eds.) *What's the Good of Education? The Economics of Education in the United Kingdom?* Princeton: University Press

McNay, I (2006) *Beyond Mass higher education* Maidenhead: Open University Press

McNay, L (1999) 'Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the limits of reflexivity' *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16, 95-117.

Marshall, G (1997) *Repositioning Class: Social Inequality in Industrial Societies* London: Sage

Mason, J (1996) *Qualitative Researching* London: Sage

Mishler, E (1986) *Research interviewing: Context and narrative* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Morris, L & Scott, J (1996) 'The Attenuation of class analysis: some comments on G Marshall, S Roberts and C Burgoyne: The Underclass in Britain in the USA' *British Journal of Sociology* Vol 47 Issue 1

Pahl, R (1989) 'Is the emperor naked?: Some questions on the adequacy of sociological theory in urban and regional research'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 13 pp. 709–720

Nash, R 'Bourdieu, 'Habitus' and Educational Research: Is it all worth the candle?' (1999) *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 20: 2 pp 175-187

Pakulski, J & Waters, M (1996a) *The Death of Class* London: Sage

Pakulski, J & Waters, M (1996b) 'The Reshaping and Dissolution of Social Class in Societies' *Theory and Society* 25 pp 667-691

Power S, Edwards, T, Whitty, G, & Wigfall V *Education and the Middle Class* Buckingham: Open University Press

Power, S & G, Whitty (2008) 'Graduating and gradations within the middle class: the legacy of an elite higher education'. Paper 118: Cardiff School of Social Sciences

Proweller, A (1998) *Constructing female identities* New York: State University of New York Press

Reay, D (1998b). 'Cultural Reproduction: Mothers' Involvement in their Children's Primary Schooling'. In: Grenfell, M. and James, D (1998). *Bourdieu and Education* London: Falmer Press.

Reay, D (2000) 'A useful extension of Bourdieu's conceptual framework? Emotional capital as a way of understanding mothers' involvement in children's schooling *Sociological Review* 48: 4, p 568-585

Reay, D (2004) It's all becoming a habitus: Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research'. *Special Issue of British Journal of Sociology on Pierre Bourdieu* 25:4, p431-444.

Reay, D (2004) 'Gendering Bourdieu's concepts of capitals? Emotional capital, women and social class' *The Sociological Review*. 52.

Reay, D & Ball, S (1997) 'Spoilt for Choice': The Working Classes and Educational Markets' *Oxford Review of Education* 23: 1

Reay, D David, M E, Ball, S J (2005) *Degrees of choice: social class, race and gender in higher education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham

Savage, M (2000) *Class Analysis and Social Transformation* Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Savage, M, Bagnall, G, & Longhurst, B (2001). Ordinary, Ambivalent and Defensive: Class Identities in the Northwest of England *Sociology* Vo. 35).

Savage, M 2003 Review Essay. 'A New Class Paradigm?' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* Vol. 24

Sayer, A, 2002 'What are you worth? Why class is an embarrassing subject', *Sociological Research Online*, 7 (3)  
<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/7/3/sayer.html>

Shavit, Y, Arum, R, Gamoran, A. (Eds) (2007) *Stratification in Higher Education* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Shrift, A D (1997) *The logic of the gift. (Selections from the Logic of Practice,*(Bourdieu, P). New York: Routledge

Skeggs, B (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender*. London. Sage.

Skeggs, B (2004) *Class, Self, Culture* London: Routledge

Skeggs, B (2005) *The Re-Branding of Class: Propertising Culture*. In Devine F, M Savage, J Scott, R Crompton (2005) *Rethinking Class*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

Swartz, D (1997) *Culture and Power* London: The University of Chicago Press.

Sweetman, P. (2003) 'Twenty-first century dis-ease? Habitual reflexivity or the reflexive habitus'. *The Sociological Review*. 51 (4).

Tapper, T & D Palfreyman. (2005). *Understanding mass higher education*. Routeledge Falmer Oxon

Thomas, L & Quinn, J (2007) *First Generation Entry into Higher Education* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Turnball, P & V Wass *Redundancy and the paradox of job insecurity*. In Heery E & J Salmon (eds) (2000) *The Insecure Workforce* London Routledge

Waquant, L (1991) 'Making Class: the Middle Class(es) in Social Theory and Social Structure' pp39-64 in McNall, S, R Levine, R Fantasia *Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* Westview Press

Wengraf, T (2007) *Qualitative Research Interviewing* London: Sage

Yanos, P & Hopper, K (2006) *On 'False, Collusive Objectivication': Becoming Attuned to Self-Censorship, Performance and Interviewer Biases in Qualitative Interviewing'* *International Journal Social Research Methodology* Vol. 11 No. 3 229-237

## **Reports**

Sutton Trust (2007) *University Admissions by individual schools*

Sutton Trust (2008) *Increasing higher education participation amongst disadvantaged young people and schools in poor communities*

Foskett, N & Helmsley-Brown, J (2000) *Changing Parental Attitudes to Independent Education* Centre for Research in Education Marketing: University of Southampton

## **Web sources**

HESA [www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk)

The Russell Group. [www.russellgroup.ac.uk](http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk)

UCAS statistical services bespoke data from [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk).

UCAS Team report into distance travelled to university (Led by Joanna Papageorgiou, UCAS Research Officer)

Universities UK [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk)

## **Government White Papers**

Fair admissions to higher education

-a review of the implementation of the Schwartz Report principles three years on: Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, Sheffield Hallam University and Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University

The Future of Higher Education (DfES 2003)

Widening Participation in Higher Education (DfES) 2003

Widening Participation in Higher Education (DfES) 2006

The Future of Higher Education (DIUS) 2008

New Opportunities – Fair Chances for the Future (DIUS) 2009





## Appendices

### Timetable of interviews and other fieldwork

November 2005	Observation of year 11 'headmaster' interviews at Grayshott Grammar.
October 2006	Meeting with participants and Head of Grayshott Grammar's Sixth Form.
Purpose	To discuss project, expectations and ground rules.
November/December 2006	First/second interviews with students.
Purpose	Following Tom Wengraf's Biographic Narrative technique (2006), and with the first question: 'How come you are at this sixth-form studying these A- levels?' This 'single question designed to induce narrative' was followed up by a second session to discuss early themes that had emerged.
November 2006	Careers evening at Grayshott Grammar

Purpose	Information gathering and participant observation.
November 2006	UCAS information evening at Grayshott Grammar.
Purpose	Information gathering and participant observation.
June 2007	Open Day for new entrants at Winterbourne College
Purpose	Information gathering and participant observation.
June/July 2007	Further interviews with students.
Purpose:	To discuss conceptions of a 'typical' student at Grayshott Grammar.
November 2007	Interviewed Careers Advisor in Winterbourne College
Purpose:	Information gathering re advice and support to students.
November/December 2007	Further interviews with students.
Purpose:	To discuss progress with university applications.

January 2008	Interview UCAS Co-ordinator and Careers Director at Grayshott Grammar
Purpose	Information gathering re: advice and support offered to students
February/March	Interviews with parents.  Parents' reasons for joining/remaining/leaving Grayshott Grammar Parents' accounts of university decision-making

## Summary of student participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sixth-form</b>	<b>Parents' occupation</b>
Felicity	Grayshott	Mother: Secretary Father: Naval Officer
Michael	Grayshott	Mother: Teacher Father: Clergyman
James	Grayshott	Mother: Doctor Father: Consultant
Ruth	Grayshott	Mother: Student Father: Lawyer
Kate	Grayshott	Mother: Secretary Father: Engineer
Pam	Grayshott	Mother: Healthcare Advisor
Louise	Grayshott	Mother: Manager Father: Manager
Jemima	Winterbourne	Mother and Father: Retail Managers
Stephen	Grayshott	Mother: Social Worker Father: Teacher
Sharon	Winterbourne	Mother and Father: Retail Managers
Richard	Winterbourne	Mother: Teacher Father: Manager
Tom	Grayshott	Mother: Psychologist Father: Chemical Engineer

## Summary of student destinations

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sixth-form</b>	<b>University destination</b>
Felicity	Grayshott	Leeds
Michael	Grayshott	Oxford
James	Grayshott	Cambridge
Ruth	Grayshott	Sheffield
Kate	Grayshott	Cardiff
Pam	Grayshott	Gap year and reapplying
Louise	Grayshott	University of London
Jemima	Winterbourne	City University
Stephen	Grayshott	University of London
Sharon	Winterbourne	Middlesex University
Richard	Winterbourne	Cambridge
Tom	Grayshott	Cardiff

## **Letters to potential participants**

Letter sent to two year 11 tutor groups in Grayshott Grammar

12 June 2006

(Student name)

Year 11

Dear (name)

As you may already know, I am carrying out research into the way in which students make their university choices. I am a PhD student at the University of Southampton, and I hope very much that some of you might be interested in contributing to the research study. I am fortunate that (headmaster) has kindly given me permission to conduct research within (Grayshott Grammar).

The aim of the research is to understand the decision-making processes as far as university choice is concerned. For example, why are some universities more popular than others? How do students reach their decisions about where to study? In order to understand this as fully as possible, I will be following the progress of a group of students through the sixth-form years to the point at which they receive their university offer.

If you are interested in being a part of this project, it would mean a time commitment of no more than four hours per academic year. I would expect to meet you during the autumn and spring terms of both

the lower and upper sixth. Some meetings would be one-to-one (although of course you may opt to bring a friend along). Others would be group meetings. Your total time commitment would be no greater than eight hours over the duration of the project.

Although I am particularly interested in talking to continuing (Grayshott Grammar) students, I will also be pleased to include any of you who may ultimately decide to transfer to a different sixth-form. So even if you are planning on leaving after Year 11, I am still interested in talking to you.

At this stage, if you are interested in taking part, please complete the slip below and return to me at [Gayna.davey@soton.ac.uk](mailto:Gayna.davey@soton.ac.uk). Once I know who is interested, I will arrange a brief session, during September, when I will provide more information.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions at all in the meantime.

Yours sincerely

Gayna Davey



4 September 2006

To: former Grayshott students

Dear student

I am carrying out research into the way in which students make their university choices. I am a PhD student at the University of Southampton, and I hope very much that some of you might be interested in contributing to the research study.

I have written to you because I am interested in the university choices of students who prior to joining (Winterbourne College), have spent years 7-11 at (Grayshott Grammar).

The aim of the research is to understand the decision-making processes as far as university choice is concerned. For example, why are some universities more popular than others? How do students reach their decisions about where to study? In order to understand this as fully as possible, I will be following the progress of students through the sixth-form years to the point at which they receive their university offer.

If you are interested in being a part of this project, it would mean a time commitment of no more than four hours per academic year. I would expect to meet you during the autumn and spring terms of both the lower and upper sixth. Some meetings would be one-to-one (although of course you may opt to bring a friend along). Others would be group meetings. Your total time commitment would be no greater than eight hours over the duration of the project.

At this stage, if you are interested in taking part, please contact me by Friday 15 September, at [Gayna.davey@soton.ac.uk](mailto:Gayna.davey@soton.ac.uk). Once I know who is interested, I will arrange a brief session, during September, when I will provide more information.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions at all in the meantime.

Yours sincerely

Gayna Davey

## Questionnaire

Your responses will be treated in confidence and at all times data will be presented in such a way that your identity cannot be connected with specific published data.

### Section 1

1) Name .....

2) When did you join (GG)? .....

3) Which GCSEs did you take? .....

(please list grades)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Please list A and  
and A/S levels being  
studied.

.....

.....

## **Section 2**

Please describe your interests outside of school  
(include clubs/sport/hobbies/favourite tv programmes/movies)

.....

.....

.....

.....

Do you carry out any paid work? (if yes, please describe)

.....

Are you considering doing paid work in the vacation periods?

.....

If you have any brothers and sisters in education, please list their gender, and the name of the school or higher education institution they attend.

.....

.....

.....

Please describe your parents' occupation(s)

.....

.....

Thank you for providing this information.

## Consent form

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be contributing to a postgraduate research project being undertaken by Gayna Davey, a PhD student at the University of Southampton. Material gathered during this research will be treated as confidential and securely stored. The tape recordings will be kept securely and destroyed in due course (as soon as they have been transcribed). The transcriptions (excluding names and others identifying details) will be retained by me and analysed as part of the study.

A summary of findings may be made available on request, however this will allow identification of, or be attributable to individual students.

### **Please answer each statement concerning the collection and use of the research data. (Delete as appropriate).**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have had my questions answered satisfactorily.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without having to an explanation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to the interview being audio taped and to its contents being used for research purposes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would like my name acknowledged in the report. and (without linking it to content or quotation).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Feel free to contact me if you have any further questions. (Email Gayna.davey@soton.ac.uk).

## **Schedule of questions**

### **Initial interview with students using Wengraf's narrative inducing question:**

'How come you're at this sixth-form, studying these particular A-levels?'

### **Interview with mothers:**

Tell me about your experience of your son/daughter joining/leaving Grayshott Grammar.

As they reach the time when UCAS choices are being made, to what extent have you been involved?

### **Interviews with students who were new to Grayshott: schedule of questions designed to explore habitus as it comes into contact with a new field:**

#### **1. Confidence:**

##### **1.1 Knowledge of academic system**

What do you understand about league tables?

What do you understand about application process?

Who would you talk to if you had a difficulty with your course?

Who would you talk to if you had a personal problem that impacted on your studies?

### 1.2 Understanding of 'unspoken' rules

The school rules are published in the '... Book'. Do people follow these?!

Are you able to 'bend the rules'?

If so, can you give me an example!

### 1.3 Relationship with teachers

Who are your favourite teachers, and why?

Are there teachers you find easier to talk to than others?

Tell me why this is.

Have you had any difficulties with teachers?

If so, how have you taken steps to improve matters?

### 2. Boundary setting:

What are your current ideas (if any), about possible University destinations?

Looking to the future, where could you see yourself aged 25?

### 3. Perception of academic self in relation to peers.



If we used a scale of 1 – 10, with 5 describing an (academically) average student here, where would you place yourself?

How do you know this?

### 3.1 Perception of 'cultural/social' self in relation to 'typical' sixth-former (at that school and generally)

People often refer to stereotypes, which conjure popular images of certain 'types', for example, the 'footballers' wives', wearing stiletto-heeled shoes, designer clothes and reading 'Hello'. Or maybe the professor as mildly eccentric, unaware of popular culture, and totally absorbed in his studies.

Is there a particular image you might choose to describe the students here? Are there certain types? If so, what are you?!

What about other students at different kinds of sixth-forms or colleges?