

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

**Friends and Futures: young people, their friends  
and their higher education choices**

**Rachel Mary Brooks**

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**Department of Sociology and Social Policy**

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**ABSTRACT**

**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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**Doctor of Philosophy**

**FRIENDS AND FUTURES: YOUNG PEOPLE, THEIR FRIENDS  
AND THEIR HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES**

**By Rachel Mary Brooks**

This research explores the role of friends and peers in young people's higher education (HE) choices. Drawing on a longitudinal study of fifteen students at a sixth form college in the south of England, this thesis demonstrates that HE decisions were rarely discussed with friends. It argues that while a majority of students may tell at least some of their friends where they are planning to apply and for what subject, previous quantitative work in this area masks both the complexity of the process of talking about HE choices with friends and the often problematic nature of such discussions. It goes on to suggest that the young people chose not to engage in discussions about HE decisions, not out of a positive choice, but because such discussions were often extremely difficult. Many of these difficulties stemmed from the hierarchical judgements that the young people made about differences (particularly those concerned with academic attainment, higher education institution and degree subject). Such judgements served, in many cases, to undermine the perceived equality of the friendship tie, or at least to emphasise previously latent differences, and for this reason were avoided. It does not, however, necessarily follow from this that friends do not have much influence over young people's HE decisions. Indeed, this thesis also explores the ways in which friends and peers were influential. Friends and the wider peer group provided the context in which young people came to construct a 'hierarchy of students'. Through social and academic comparisons with other young people, they came to work out their own place on this emerging hierarchy. This allowed students to map their own position relative to their peers onto a similar ranking of universities and, thus, to decide which institutions represented a 'feasible' choice.

Despite the significant differences between friends, which emerged as they gave serious thought to their HE choices, almost all of the young people who took part in this study maintained very stable friendships. Previous studies of friendship have emphasised the fluidity of such relationships, particularly when the social location of individuals changes and friends no longer perceive themselves to be socially equal. However, evidence from this study suggests that sociologists have tended to overstate the degree of change that follows from an awareness of growing difference and inequality. In this case, at least, friends employed a range of strategies to manage and maintain relationships that they recognised to be increasingly unequal. In seeking to explain the reason why the students employed such strategies, and were so concerned to maintain their existing friendships, the thesis suggests that they viewed their friendships as 'transitional' and anticipated that change was inevitable on entry to higher education. This may have provided strong motivation to postpone any changes until they arrived at university or college. By suggesting that, in some circumstances, people are willing and able to maintain what they perceive to be increasingly unequal relationships, and by outlining the strategies used to achieve these ends, this thesis makes an original contribution to debate within the sociology of friendship, and provides a contrast to previous studies that have emphasised the ways in which friendships change in line with perceived changes to social location.

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## CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

In May 2000, Laura Spence, an A Level student from a comprehensive school in North Tyneside, was widely portrayed by the British media as an innocent victim of a discriminatory and elitist higher education system. Laura, who had an outstanding academic record (ten A-starred GCSEs and A-grades predicted for all five of her A Levels), had been rejected by Magdalen College, Oxford University after an interview for a place to study medicine. A confidential memo about Laura's interview, which was leaked to the BBC, appeared to make disparaging remarks about comprehensive school students generally, while acknowledging that Laura was likely to make 'an excellent doctor'. The debate that ensued (or the 'Battle of Laura's Brain', as it was dubbed by the *Times Educational Supplement*), conducted variously by MPs, media commentators, school teachers, higher education staff and, famously, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, suggested that broad sections of British society were far from convinced that the nation's universities (and, particularly, those deemed to be high status institutions) were accessible to all young people on an equal basis. Contrasts were drawn with the supposedly more meritocratic higher education system operating in the United States, particularly as Laura had subsequently been offered a generous scholarship to pursue her studies at Harvard.

The Laura Spence debate highlighted clearly some of the main tensions within higher education policy over recent years. In particular, it brought into sharp relief the contrast between the emphasis within government policy on education as a means of promoting social cohesion (see, for example, Blunkett, 1999) – to be achieved in higher education largely through initiatives to 'widen participation' – and the enduring social inequalities across the sector. Since it was elected in 1997, Labour's 'widening participation' agenda has included: extra funding for universities, related to the number of students recruited from what are deemed to be less affluent areas; the 'Excellence Challenge' – a three-year programme to improve links between schools, colleges and universities, to encourage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to higher education; and 'Aim Higher' – a three-year marketing campaign providing information to 13-19 year olds about going to university and the benefits of higher education. However, despite this level of activity within both the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Higher Education Funding Council for

England (HEFCE), patterns of access to higher education have shown a stubborn resistance to change.

This chapter outlines the evolving nature of the higher education (HE) sector at the turn of the twenty-first century. In particular, it describes: the drive to achieve a ‘mass’ higher education system and its differential impact on different sections of society; changes to the structure of the sector (which have emerged largely as a result of expansion); and alterations to funding arrangements for students. It maintains that, within this changing context, it is highly likely that young people’s perceptions of higher education, and their decisions about their own involvement in it, have also undergone considerable change. Thus, it seems an important time in which to document young people’s experiences. The chapter then goes on to argue that given the relatively high priority accorded to higher education by the current government, it behoves policymakers, as well as teachers and HE staff, to consider carefully empirical evidence about young people’s decision-making processes with regard to their post-18 options.

In the second part of this chapter I suggest that young people’s social networks and, in particular, their friends and peers may provide important insights into the way in which they engage with the higher education market and the relative importance of higher education decisions to their lives. Self-disclosure, openness and sharing plans for the future are all strongly emphasised within recent theorising about the nature of friendship and are also prominent themes within the social psychological literature on adolescent friendships. The chapter argues that if these characteristics do indeed structure young people’s relationships, then discussions of HE options may well constitute an important component of their friendships. It then goes on to suggest that a focus on informal relationships is of particular use in exploring issues around educational choice, as has been demonstrated by a small number of studies of decision-making within compulsory schooling. It maintains that such an approach allows us to develop a more rounded understanding of decisions about university and, in particular, can help to contextualise previous quantitative studies of choice. It may also help to illuminate the ways in which engaging in the process of decision-making may itself affect young people’s friendships. Finally, the chapter outlines the specific research questions that informed this study, the structure of the thesis and some of the main arguments that are pursued within it.

## 1.2 Higher education at the turn of the twenty-first century

In 2000, as Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett acknowledged that: 'Rarely in this country have governments developed coherent and strategic higher education policies. Higher education has been addressed only episodically, and without sustained interest, for much of our recent political history' (2000, p.1). Despite – or perhaps because of – this lack of strategic direction, the past thirty years have witnessed a period of unprecedented change for higher education in the UK. The size of the sector, its structure and the way it is funded have all altered considerably, with profound implications for both those employed within universities and colleges and young people making decisions about their post-18 destinations.

First, as Table 1 demonstrates, the proportion of young people studying in higher education has increased almost six-fold since the early 1960s, from only six per cent of 19-20 year olds in 1961 to a third of this age group in 2001. Within this period, growth was most pronounced between the 1988-89 and 1993-94 academic years, when the full-time participation of 18-21 year olds increased from 15 per cent to 30 per cent (HEFCE, 2001). Although some of this expansion has undoubtedly been driven by increasing levels of educational attainment at both 16 and 18 and greater demand for HE from young people and their families (Connor *et al.*, 1996a), it has also been stimulated by policies to widen access, pursued by both Conservative and Labour administrations. The Conservative target of one-third of 18-19 year olds entering HE by the end of the 1990s was achieved by the middle of the decade (Tomlinson, 2001), while the incoming Labour government of 1997 extended this policy, setting the target of a 50 per cent participation rate (of all young people by the age of 30) by 2010 (Blunkett, 2000). Expansion has not, however, benefited all young people equally. While both women and ethnic minorities increased their representation in higher education during the 1990s, to near parity with their representation in the population as a whole (UCAS, 1999), participation levels have remained low for those from poorer social classes (Table 2). Indeed, despite a wide range of initiatives to encourage young people from social classes IV and V to enter higher education, the level of participation amongst these groups has remained fairly static – at around seven per cent for those in social class IV and two per cent for those in social class V (compared to their representation in the population as a whole at around fifteen per cent and six per cent, respectively (Mackinnon and Statham, 1999)). Thus, while 'widening participation' clearly remains a central plank of the government's higher education policy (DfES, 2001a; DfES, 2002; Hodge, 2001), its impact to date appears negligible.

Table 1: Age Participation Index 1961-2001<sup>1</sup>

1961	1966	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001 projected
6	10	14	13	13	14	23	33	33-35

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: DfEE (2001), Greenaway and Haynes (2000)

Table 2: Proportion of all accepted UK applicants to degree courses, by social class 1996-2000

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
I	15	14	14	13	13
II	40	39	40	39	40
IIIN	12	12	12	12	12
IIIM	15	14	15	14	14
IV	7	8	7	7	7
V	2	2	2	2	2
Not known	10	11	11	12	12

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Thus, some columns do not add up to 100 per cent.

Source: UCAS

A second change has been that to the structure of the HE sector: the relationship between institutions, and the basis upon which prospective students, employers and society more generally differentiate between them. Although less clearly articulated than the goal of expanding student numbers, both David Blunkett, in his capacity as Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and Margaret Hodge, as Minister for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, have called for the further diversification of the HE sector. They have suggested that individual universities should concentrate on what they do best: 'the system must evolve greater diversity... a unitary system is not a uniform one' (Blunkett, 2000), and have outlined proposals for a three tier HE sector, comprising research universities, regional universities and community colleges (Thomson, 2000). Although such explicit diversification has yet to be implemented, the structure of the university sector seems already to have undergone considerable change and differentiation over the course of the 1990s. There is convincing evidence that while the process of 'massification' has offered

<sup>1</sup> The Age Participation Index is defined as the number of young (under 21) initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses of higher education expressed as a proportion of the averaged 18- to 19-year old British population.

opportunities to go on to higher education to many more young people, it has simultaneously altered the nature of the sector as a whole. As the HE market has grown, so hierarchical distinctions between institutions have become more pronounced and socially significant. Indeed, it has been widely argued that these distinctions have, in effect, operated as barriers to the 'new recruits' to the HE system (Ainley, 1994; Brown and Scase, 1994). The nature and impact of these barriers is pursued further in Chapter Two.

The third and perhaps most controversial change to the HE sector over recent years has been that to student funding. In 1997, the incoming Labour government accepted the recommendation of the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) that full-time students, as major beneficiaries of higher education, should contribute to their tuition costs. As a result, in 1998 the government introduced means-tested student contributions to university tuition fees. Alongside this (and in accordance with Labour's 1997 manifesto commitment), maintenance grants were phased out and, in 1999/2000, were fully replaced by loans that are repaid after graduation, according to earnings. Tuition fees were argued to be necessary if the sector was to continue to expand and, thus, to offer the opportunity to enter higher education to a wider group of young people (DfEE, 1997). However, research has indicated that, in many cases, the policy has had the opposite effect, increasing the perceived risks of entering higher education (Callender and Kemp, 2000) and discouraging some young people from poorer backgrounds from studying for a degree (Connor *et al.*, 1999; Goddard, 1999; Knowles, 2000). Indeed, this has been tacitly recognised by the government in its decision to review mechanisms for student support during 2002 (Elliot Major, 2001).

Since Labour was elected in 1997, education ministers have consistently emphasised that their higher education policies are driven by two main concerns: to increase the economic competitiveness of the nation and to build a more equal and inclusive society (Blunkett, 2000; DfES, 2001a; Hodge, 2001). Although these aims, as well as the efficacy of the policies put in place to achieve them, have been widely questioned (see, for example, Alexiadou's (2002) critique of the conceptualisation of 'social inclusion' that has underpinned education policy), government rhetoric continues to emphasise both the 'economic necessity' of higher education reform and the 'socially just' nature of current HE policies (Hodge, 2001). Given this commitment to increasing student numbers, diversifying the function of higher education institutions (HEIs) and increasing the participation of historically under-represented groups, it seems imperative that policymakers, HE staff and

teachers and careers advisers in schools and colleges understand the ways in which young people make decisions about their post-18 destinations. The research on which this thesis is based aims to further this understanding.

### **1.3 Young people and their friends and peers**

#### **1.3.1 Friendship in adolescence**

My research into the influence of friends and peers on young people's higher education choices has also been stimulated by debates about the nature and function of friendship during adolescence. The importance of disclosure and openness, particularly about current plans and hopes for the future, are articulated clearly within both sociological and social psychological studies of adolescent relationships. Moreover, the peer-orientation of young people is widely assumed within much of this literature. In the 1960s, Parsons (1964) argued that the importance of peer relationships lay in the psychological support they provided for young people as they passed through a transitional stage of the life cycle, and similar claims pervade many contemporary studies (Bukowski *et al.*, 1996; Hendry *et al.*, 1993; Youniss and Smollar, 1985). Indeed, it is commonly held that as young people enter adolescence, so the nature of their friendships changes; they develop new forms of intimacy with their friends that include 'a more exclusive focus, openness to self-disclosure and the sharing of problems and advice' (Hendry *et al.*, 1993, p.115). Thus, intimacy is central to this understanding of adolescent friendship, and intimate conversations, in which personal information is shared, are argued to give young people 'a better understanding of other people and a broader perspective on the world' (Berndt, 1999, p.57). It is claimed that these new, intimate forms of friendship help young people to begin the process of emotional detachment from parents (Erwin, 1998; Lloyd, 1985), establish their own identities, roles and values (Hendry *et al.*, 1993) and learn how to manage different degrees of friendship and different types of relationship (Duck, 1983).

It is widely argued within much of this literature (as well as within the popular press) that during adolescence, peers and friends exert a considerable influence on each other's attitudes and values. Indeed, some see this as an inevitable consequence of the increasing openness and disclosure to friends, discussed above. Duck (1983), for example, claims that during adolescence there is a noticeable shift away from parents and adults as points of reference, towards peers, who 'gradually, but significantly, become much more central torchbearers of

opinions and standards' (p.134). However, the impact of friends and peers does not appear to be constant throughout adolescence: studies have indicated that conformity to the friendship group appears to lessen in late adolescence, perhaps as a result of young people's increasing romantic attachments and/or because by this time young people have clarified their sense of identity and are thus less dependent on affirmation from peers (Bradford Brown *et al.*, 1986; Coleman and Hendry, 1999). Moreover, social psychologists have increasingly emphasized young people's active ability to choose their friends through shared interests, rather than succumb to the pressure of the clique (Coggans and McKellar, 1994), and the frequent congruence between parental attitudes and those of friends and peers (Coleman and Hendry, 1999). Although these more recent studies refute some of the stronger claims made about 'peer pressure' within the sociological and social psychological literature, they do, nevertheless, acknowledge the subtler but equally pervasive influence of friends in learning appropriate forms of behaviour, devising strategies of resistance and giving and receiving social support (Lees, 1993; Shucksmith and Hendry, 1998).

If the assumptions of these studies are accepted, it seems highly likely that higher education choices would be discussed by young people with their friends and peers. Indeed, Berndt (1999) suggests that conversations about life plans are an important part of the intimate friendships formed during adolescence. Discussing plans for the future and asking for support and advice about HE choices would seem to be an obvious way in which the emphasis within the social psychological literature on self-disclosure and the affirmation of identity could be played out. My research was intended to articulate with some of these debates, and these themes are taken up again in Chapters Six and Seven. As I have suggested above, the literature about the extent and nature of peer influence is more ambivalent. Nevertheless, my research also attempts to engage with some of these arguments by exploring the extent to which young people's friends and peers represented an important source of influence on their educational decisions and the ways in which any such influence was exerted. This provides the focus for Chapter Five.

### **1.3.2 The new friendship of late modernity?**

Current debates about the nature and function of friendship have also informed my research. The role of friends and peers has long been an important focus within the sociology of education, from Coleman's (1961) exploration of peer group domination in a secondary school to Mac an Ghail's (1994) more recent work on the ways in which friendship groups

influence the construction of masculinity, and Hey's (1997) work on girls' friendships and the construction of 'difference'. However, it is only relatively recently that friendship has captured the imagination of those working within other areas of sociology (see, for example, research exploring the interrelationships between friendship and household formation (Heath and Kenyon, 2001) and the impact of the internet on the practice of friendship and other relationships (Schonfield Clark, 1998)). This interest has been motivated largely by debate about the emergence of new forms of relationships in the late twentieth century, and the extent to which friendship has increased in importance over recent years, particularly in relation to putative changes in the practice of kin relationships.

It has been claimed by sociologists such as Beck (1992), Giddens (1992, 1999) and Pahl (1998, 2000) that the conditions of late modernity have given rise to a new type of friendship, which Giddens has labelled the 'pure relationship'. In contrast to previous forms of friendship, such a relationship is maintained only for as long as it satisfies the needs of the persons involved. Thus, it refers: 'to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (Giddens, 1992, p.58). Central to the pure relationship is an emphasis on openness, disclosure and emotional communication. Indeed, Giddens and others claim that talk – the basis of making the relationship work – is predicated upon a process of active trust and a willingness to open oneself up to the other. Within this model of friendship, particular prominence is given by some theorists to the relationships forged by young people. Pahl (1998), for example, suggests that in contemporary society, where neither employment nor family relationships may be able to provide a sense of security, 'those friends whom people have known since school or college serve as anchor points in their lives and can help to provide emotional integration and stability' (p.103). However, in contrast to some of the studies discussed in section 1.3.1, above, these theorists argue that peer orientation remains central throughout the life course, and is not merely a feature of adolescence.

However, the extent to which contemporary friendships do, in practice, resemble the 'pure relationship' is highly contested. Critics have pointed out that, far from having new freedoms to choose when, how and with whom we form friendships (assumptions which underpin notions of the pure relationship), in practice, friendship continues to be constrained by the



norms of heterosexuality, as well as by the social divisions of class, gender and ethnicity (Jamieson, 1998), while its form and content are strongly influenced by the circumstances under which it is constructed (Allan, 1998a). Nevertheless, the dominance of ideas associated with the pure relationship, within popular discourse as well as sociological debate, suggests that it may be fruitful to explore the extent to which young people's friendships are consonant with this model of friendship. If such relationships are widely practised by young people, it seems likely that the disclosure and discussion of higher education deliberations would be an important part of such friendships (indeed, the importance of sharing plans for the future is explicitly discussed by Pahl (1998)). This provides another key focal point for the research, and I return to these themes in Chapters Four and Six.

### **1.3.3 Friendship and educational choice**

A focus on informal relationships, and particularly friendships, also seems to offer a fruitful means of extending understanding within the sociology of education. In their study of the career and higher education choices of American students, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) claim that although friends have an important role to play in shaping young people's self-identity, they have little impact on their educational choices. British studies have, however, painted a contrasting picture. Indeed, Roberts and Allen (1997) have argued that a young person's peer group is the second most common source of influence on his or her decisions about higher education after that of the family, while Connor *et al.* (1999) and Moogan *et al.* (1999) have confirmed similar trends among their respondents. Nevertheless, these studies of the role of friends in the HE decisions of young people in British schools and colleges have drawn exclusively on quantitative data, and thus give little indication of the *nature* of friend and peer influences.

Furthermore, while a number of recent studies have drawn on qualitative (as well as, in some cases, quantitative) data to provide detailed accounts of the way in which young people's HE decisions are affected by their social class (Ball *et al.*, 2002; David *et al.*, 2001a; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), ethnicity (Ball *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001b) and the educational institution they attend (Pugsley, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001a), the influence of friends has been largely neglected within the terms of their analyses. Several of these studies have certainly alluded to the role played by friends and peers (David *et al.*, 2001a; Reay, 1998a; Reay *et al.*, 2001a; Roker, 1993), but the precise nature of the influence has not been explored. Thus, this thesis attempts to illuminate further some of these processes by

exploring the informal relationships of young people engaged in the decision-making process with regards to HE.

The value of such an approach – focussing on friend and peer relationships within studies of education – has become evident over recent years. Indeed, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) note that:

In examining the ‘choice’ processes of young people, the social context of their relationships with peers, family and teachers provides an important area for analysis. Just as this is a period in which they are seeking to identify their own individual *persona* in the transition from childhood via adolescence to youth to the status of young adult, so their decisions will reflect in part an attempt to establish or protect their position in these relationship groups (p.121).

Their comments reflect broader trends within research on educational choice, trends which have seen a move away from statistical analyses identifying the relative influence of specific, unitary factors towards a concern to document more fully the ‘lived experiences’ of individuals and groups engaging with specific education markets. Although this has been most apparent in studies of how children and their families choose secondary schools (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Lauder and Hughes, 1999; Reay and Lucey, 2000), recent studies have also drawn effectively on young people’s broader social contexts (including, to some extent, their friendships and other peer relationships) to develop an understanding of their *post-16* decisions (Ball *et al.*, 2000; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 1996; Taylor, 1992). It would seem that a similar focus on young people’s relationships with their friends and peers may help to illuminate their higher education choices between the ages of 16 and 18. This provided another strong stimulus for the study.

## **1.4 Research questions and main arguments of the thesis**

### **1.4.1 Research questions**

Sections 1.2 and 1.3, above, have explained my motivation for focussing on young people’s decision-making with regards to HE at the turn of the twenty-first century, and for exploring what influence, if any, friends and peers exerted on this process. These two concerns informed my original research questions: do friends and peers have any influence on young

people's higher education decisions and, if so, what is the nature of this influence and how is it exerted? However, as the study progressed, it emerged that the decision-making process, itself, was exerting a reciprocal influence on the young people's friendships and, this also, became an important focus of the research and informed my third research question: what influence, if any, does the decision-making process exert on young people's friendships? I became concerned to explore the relative importance of the higher education decision-making process in the lives of young people and, in particular, its impact on the ways in which they practised and managed their friendships.

#### **1.4.2 Structure of the thesis and main arguments**

As this chapter has made clear, my research questions were informed by: my reading of the literature on the nature and function of young people's friendships; my interest in the changing policy context of higher education at the turn of the twenty-first century; and a (previously unanticipated) issue that emerged during the first stages of fieldwork. They were also influenced by theorising within the sociology of education, and it is this that provides the basis for Chapter Two. The chapter reviews a wide range of studies that have particular relevance to research on HE choice and, thus, provides a theoretical context for the thesis. It draws on both policy discourses and sociological theory to discuss the contested purpose of the higher education system and the emergence and role of a hierarchy of institutions within the HE sector. After reviewing these debates, it suggests that the two main theories upon which researchers have drawn (located within a 'liberal' position and a competing 'social closure' position) are inadequate to explain elements of social mobility within a largely reproductive system. Instead, it argues that Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, as adapted by educational researchers such as Diane Reay and Phil Hodgkinson, offers a more satisfactory theoretical base.

In Chapter Three I return to my research questions and outline the methods I used to explore young people's HE choices. I explain my decision to use a longitudinal, qualitative study of fifteen young people and their friends at 'Emily Davies College' – a sixth-form college in the south of England. I discuss a number of issues relevant to the use of this particular method such as the changing relationship between interviewer and interviewee over the course of a longitudinal study, the extent to which being part of such a project impacted upon the respondents' lives and my approach to inconsistencies and contradictions within the data. My sampling decisions are also discussed: I outline my reasons for choosing the college and

young people on whom my research is based. On the basis of the characteristics of the young people (and also those of the college), I consider the extent to which it is possible to generalize the findings of my study to other contexts. Finally, I discuss issues specific to researching friendships and a number of ethical considerations.

Chapters Four to Six draw on empirical data from the research to develop three main arguments. First, in Chapter Four, I argue that the young people involved in my research did not discuss their higher education deliberations, or indeed their choices, with their friends at any length. This contrasts with the high profile given to peer and friend influences in previous quantitative studies of young people's higher education choices (Connor *et al.*, 1999; Roberts and Allen, 1997). My research suggests that while a majority of students may tell at least some of their friends where they are planning to apply and for what subject, previous quantitative work in this area masks both the complexity of the process of talking about HE choices with friends and the often problematic nature of such discussions. I argue that the young people chose not to engage in discussions about HE decisions, not out of a positive choice, but because such discussions were often extremely difficult. Many of these difficulties stemmed from the hierarchical judgements that the young people made about differences (particularly those concerned with academic attainment, higher education institution and, to a lesser extent, degree subject). Such judgements served, in many cases, to undermine the perceived equality of the friendship tie, or at least to emphasise previously latent differences, and for this reason were avoided.

It does not, however, necessarily follow from this that friends do not have much influence over young people's HE decisions. Indeed, Chapter Five goes on to explore the ways in which friends and peers were influential – through a limited number of 'direct' or 'explicit' means but primarily through more implicit influences. Drawing on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of cultural reproduction, the chapter argues that friends and the wider peer group provided the context in which young people came to construct a 'hierarchy of students'. Through social and academic comparisons with other young people, they came to work out their own place on this emerging hierarchy. Indeed, rankings within friendship groups and between friends were, in many cases, transposed directly onto a hierarchy of HE institutions and courses. The chapter also explores the various ways in which the Emily Davies students came to understand the structure of the HE sector (in most cases drawing on the cultural resources of their families) and the different, but usually hierarchical, ways in

which they categorised HE institutions and courses. On the basis of these distinctions, it argues that diversity amongst those of a similar middle class position has not been adequately theorised in previous studies of HE choice.

Chapter Six shows how, despite the significant differences between friends, which emerged as they gave serious thought to their HE choices, almost all of the young people who took part in this study maintained very stable friendships over the period of the research. Previous studies of friendship have emphasised the fluidity of such relationships, particularly when the social location of individuals changes and friends no longer perceive themselves to be socially equal (Allan, 1996, 1998a). However, evidence from this study suggests that some sociologists may have overstated the degree of change that follows from an awareness of growing difference and inequality. In this case, at least, friends employed a range of strategies to manage and maintain relationships that they recognised to be increasingly unequal. In seeking to explain the reason why they employed such strategies, and were so concerned to maintain their existing friendships, the chapter suggests that the young people may have viewed their friendships as ‘transitional’ and have anticipated that change was inevitable on entry to higher education. This may have provided strong motivation to postpone any changes until they arrived at university or college – when making such changes would, anyway, be much less problematic due to the likely geographical separation of friends.

These arguments are brought together in Chapter Seven, the conclusion. It discusses the ways in which young people ‘choose’ within higher education markets, the nature of their choices, and the reciprocal influences that educational choices may exert on other parts of their lives. First, it considers the evidence about the role of friends and peers in students’ higher education decisions and argues that they play a critical role. By informing a young person’s sense of self and position relative to others, they help to determine what is considered to be a ‘feasible’ university choice. The chapter then considers the extent to which the evidence from this study is consonant with sociological models of choice, particularly theories of ‘individualization’ and Bourdieu’s concept of cultural reproduction. The chapter then goes on to look more explicitly at young people’s friendships and how these are affected by processes of educational choice. In contrast to much recent theorising, it argues that young people are able to maintain friendships that they perceive to be increasingly socially unequal. It considers whether these patterns are likely to be replicated

at other points in life or whether they are unique to young people at a 'transitional' stage of their lives. Finally, the chapter considers how this work may inform a future research agenda, and discusses its implications for education policy.

## **CHAPTER TWO. PURPOSES AND HIERARCHIES: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The changes to the higher education system over recent decades, which were outlined in Chapter One, have prompted considerable debate amongst politicians, journalists and educationalists about the purpose of a university education. The first part of this chapter considers some of the main ways in which this purpose has been articulated, drawing on a number of different ‘official discourses’. It argues that most of these discourses are underpinned by one of two competing theoretical explanations: one that draws on ‘liberal’ or ‘technocratic’ arguments, and a second that relies on theories of social closure. While the rhetoric of politicians and government officials – as well as much government policy – seems to be predicated on the former, the empirical research discussed in this chapter suggests that young people’s HE choices can be more adequately explained by the latter.

Since the removal of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics in 1992, there has also been much discussion about differences in status between universities and the emerging ‘hierarchy’ of institutions (manifest in the increasing number of newspaper league tables that have appeared over the past decade). The second part of the chapter considers the extent to which people are aware of this unofficial hierarchy, its impact upon graduate recruitment practices, and its influence upon young people’s HE choices. Again, it considers whether the emergence of such a hierarchy can be explained in terms of ‘liberal’ theories about HE but concludes that, on the basis of strong empirical evidence, the competing social closure position offers a more satisfactory theoretical base.

However, this chapter also maintains that while theories of social closure (and especially Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural reproduction’) explain well the persistent social inequalities within the HE system, they fail to account for: examples (albeit limited) of social mobility; differences in the social class profile of universities of a similar status; and changes to the class profile of specific institutions over time. Although it can be argued that these exceptions are necessary to theories of social closure (to legitimate ‘myths’ about ‘meritocracy’, for example), I suggest that exploring further the mechanisms through which certain young people are able to ‘escape the collective fate of their class’ (Bourdieu, 1976,

p.116) may itself be a useful enterprise. Indeed, in the final part of the chapter I discuss several studies that have outlined ways in which parents and students have been successful in changing their class dispositions, beliefs and other aspects of what Bourdieu calls the 'habitus'.

## **2.2 The purpose of higher education**

When exploring the purpose of higher education, some writers have confined themselves to the discourses made explicit by politicians and others directly involved with formulation and implementation of higher education policy (for example, Williams, 1997). Others have looked beyond this official rhetoric and drawn on wider sociological theories to explain patterns of access. Some writers argue that, at any one point in time, there has been one dominant perceived purpose of higher education, even if this has changed over time (Salter and Tapper, 1994), while others suggest that several dominant purposes have co-existed at various periods (Williams, 1997). In this section, I will explore briefly some of the current discourses about higher education, drawing largely on Williams' typology. However, I will go on to suggest that while this is extremely useful for locating official and political positions, it does not engage sufficiently with the large body of sociological research, particularly that espousing a strong social closure argument. In this respect, the dichotomy between broadly liberal/technological approaches and social closure outlined by Halsey (1991) and Brown (1997) is more satisfactory. However, it will be argued that both of these theories fail to account for a limited degree of social mobility within an essentially reproductive system.

### **2.2.1 Official discourses**

In her work on access to HE, Williams (1997) identifies five discrete discourses which not only serve to define the purpose of higher education but also imply quite different legitimisation practices and definitions of the boundaries between 'normal' and 'abnormal' students (p.21). The groups constructing these different discourses are identified as: academic traditionalists; marketeers; utilitarian trainers; liberal meritocrats; and those involved in the access movement. Her typology demonstrates effectively the diverse ways in which higher education is understood by different groups in contemporary society, as well as some of the enduring tensions concerning the purpose of universities and colleges. For *academic traditionalists*, academic freedom is intertwined with the institutional freedom to



determine who is admitted to study and what courses are offered to students. They emphasise the gold standard of A Level point scores, which symbolise and reinforce notions of academic merit and present them as neutral, fair and a just selector of the suitable. *Marketeers* believe that the government has a residual role in deciding on the size and purpose of HE through its control of finance but should leave academics to decide upon the nature of the universities and students to choose which of the competing universities they should attend. They idealise the market as a neutral, rationing mechanism based on consumer choice rather than government intervention. The assumption that national economic success is intimately linked with the production of highly skilled graduates underpins the position of the *utilitarian trainers*. Wider access is seen in terms of a widening of the skills deemed relevant for access to HE, the content of what is on offer and the destinations of graduates as employees. *Liberal meritocrats* argue that the individual has a right to education if he or she is adequately qualified and emphasise the value of education for its own sake (although society may benefit as a by-product). Finally, Williams outlines the position of those in the *access movement*, who prioritise provision for groups historically excluded from higher education and who are concerned with the structural rather than the individual nature of inequality.

Williams' own critique of many of these positions seems to be founded upon social closure arguments (for example: the questions she raises about the neutrality of notions of merit; and her argument that conceptualising the student as consumer is problematic due to the differences in power that different students can yield). However, this sociological position is never made explicit – in part this is due to her focus on the discourses of practitioners rather than those of commentators, researchers or sociologists. A more rigorous discussion of the contrasting theories that underpin Williams' different discourses is provided by Halsey (1991) and Brown (1997). Although they do not use identical terminology and disagree on some specific points, both identify what can be broadly categorised as a 'liberal/technocratic' position and a competing, 'neo-Marxist/social closure' position. These are discussed in the sections that follow, and related to the available empirical evidence.

### **2.2.2 The liberal position**

The liberal view of HE is underpinned by a belief in meritocracy – that individuals should and can compete for university places on their own merits. Barriers to entry are acknowledged but not perceived as insurmountable. However, within this position, two

different strands can be discerned, differing primarily in their explanations of HE expansion. The first strand is based on the premise that HE should expand to cater for all who are adequately qualified, regardless of the economic context. Advocates of the second strand maintain that the development of society requires a progressive upgrading of the skills demanded in the economy. They argue that, as the structure of employment changes with technological advances, society demands more skilled and knowledgeable workers (Watson and Taylor, 1998). Within this second strand, social mobility is seen as both possible and inevitable: students are selected for university on merit; and, as a result of technological changes, technical, managerial and professional sectors of employment expand and come to replace a small elite. Indeed, these structural changes to the economy have been used to explain the increases in absolute social mobility over the past century (Heath and Payne, 2000).

Elements of both strands of the liberal argument are evident in a number of ‘official’ discourses about the purpose of HE. The former pervades the Robbins Report of the 1960s (Anderson, 1995; Brown and Scase, 1994) and also underpinned efforts to increase the representation of women in universities in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Arnot *et al.*, 1999). The second, economic, strand has been articulated by the Confederation of British Industry (1994) and the Council for Industry and Higher Education (1995), both of whom have called for the expansion of HE to enable at least 50-60 per cent of young people to go on to university, and more recently, by various Labour education ministers, in outlining their vision for the future of higher education (see, for example: Blunkett, 2000; DfES, 2001a; Hodge, 2001). Within Williams’ typology, both the utilitarian trainers and the liberal meritocrats draw on some aspects of this theory. Indeed, all discourses that focus on the individual rather than his or her structural location have some basis in the liberal position.

Within the sociology of education, the liberal position has been rejected by a large number of writers on the grounds that HE has not, in practice, facilitated substantial social mobility (Kerr (1973) and Trow (1988) are notable exceptions). Although the representation of women within HE has increased dramatically over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, students from lower socio-economic status (SES) families have not made similar gains. As I outlined in the previous chapter, despite the sharp increase in the number of students studying for a degree since the late 1980s, and the initiatives to ‘widen participation’ pursued since the 1990s, young people from social classes IV and V have continued to be significantly under-

represented in HE (see Table 2 in Chapter One). Furthermore, in common with both women and students from ethnic minorities, when lower social classes have increased their representation, it has largely been concentrated in low status institutions, particularly the former polytechnics (Smithers and Robinson, 1995), while entry to high status institutions has remained the preserve of the more affluent (Sutton Trust, 2000). This would suggest that it is unwise to assume that the expansion of HE has led to an increase in social mobility. Although Saunders (1990) maintains that changes to the education system have been significant, in that they have opened up opportunities for greater intra-generational mobility, other sociologists (for example, Marshall and Swift, 1996 and Marshall *et al.*, 1988) have argued that, whilst people may have new opportunities, the *differences* in the opportunities available to different social groups remain. It may also be the case that as going on to HE becomes a more common pathway for increasing numbers of young people, the disadvantage of those who are left outside the system becomes more acute (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001).

The liberal position has also come under attack because of its reliance on the idea of a meritocracy. Goldthorpe (1997) has argued that the notion of ‘merit’ is social; is constructed in diverse ways in a market economy; and that there is no one standard of measuring merit. The premise of this position is a perceived tension between the concept of merit and that of talent or natural ability. Goldthorpe questions how merit (i.e. actual achievement) is determined and goes on to suggest that it is situationally specific: what constitutes merit is ultimately subjective. However, he does not deny its importance: both as a ‘necessary myth’ to encourage people to believe that their well-being depends on their efforts, and as a ‘regulative ideal’ to curb the excesses of social exclusion.

Some researchers have engaged specifically with the economic arguments for HE expansion and have asserted that there is little evidence that HE expansion does benefit the economy (Murphy, 1993; Brown, 1997; Ainley, 1994). Instead, they suggest that expansion has been driven by primarily political motives – to tackle youth unemployment (Brown and Scase, 1994); to appeal to the mass electorate through a populist policy (Watson and Taylor, 1998); or to justify state intervention in HE and challenge the dominance of a traditional liberal ideal (Salter and Tapper, 1994). However, others have emphasised the close interaction between economic and political imperatives. For example, Blackman and Jarman (1993) argue that: ‘developments of the economy increase the labour market demand for graduates and the student demand for university places, the expansion of university education then generates

further demand for graduates, and this demand leads to further student demand for university education' (p. 203). This more sophisticated account seems to reflect, more adequately, the often complex and interdependent relationship between political and economic decisions.

### **2.2.3 The social closure position**

For Halsey (1991), the competing position to the liberal conception of HE is grounded in neo-Marxist theories of economic determinism. This focuses on the internal stratification of the education system and the part played by universities and colleges in socialising children for their ascribed role in society. This position can be seen in the work of social reproductionists such as Bowles and Gintis (1976). Brown (1997), however, uses the idea of social closure developed by Parkin (1979) to argue that the basis of such stratification is not only economic: groups can attempt to maintain exclusive control over resources, limiting access to them on the basis of, for example, ethnicity, religion or language. Social closure has been a pervasive argument within the sociology of education and has been particularly important in recent attempts to theorise the purpose of HE. (It has also been central to explanations of the increasingly hierarchical nature of the HE sector – discussed in more detail in section 2.3.3, below.)

Recent research on decisions about whether or not to go on to higher education has provided strong evidence of the socially-embedded nature of such choices. First, it is clear that levels of academic attainment have an important bearing on whether or not entry to university is considered feasible, and there is now a large body of literature outlining the ways in which attainment is affected by a range of social factors. For example, Walkerdine *et al.* (2001) argue that academic practices in school are much more similar to middle class, professional practices than working class norms. Thus, they argue that, for working class young people, succeeding at school 'necessitate[s] learning new forms of subjectivity' (p.120) – a requirement rarely demanded of their middle class peers. Research has also illustrated the impact specific educational institutions can have on both attainment and aspiration: Roker (1993) describes the 'edge' given to young women attending an elite private school through providing high quality facilities, good teaching and individual attention, and developing students' confidence and high aspirations in relation to HE. Furthermore, for students between the ages of 16 and 18, social differences may be exacerbated by the need for those from less affluent backgrounds to engage in paid employment – leaving them with less time to devote to their academic work (Reay *et al.*, 2001b). However, even amongst young people

with the same level of attainment at A Level, social inequalities persist, with those from social classes IV and V significantly less likely to go on to HE than their counterparts (with equivalent levels of qualification) from classes I and II (Metcalf, 1997).

Indeed, the risks associated with studying for a degree have been shown to be unevenly distributed across society – patterned by ethnicity, gender and, most notably, social class. Archer and Hutchings (2000, 2001) found that the HE aspirations of the working class young people in their study were severely constrained by: the belief that poverty as a student was inevitable; a reluctance to take up loans because of the burden of debt it would leave them with; and concerns about whether the costs of studying for a degree would be offset by increased earning power in an overcrowded graduate labour market. However, the authors also report that the young people knew very little about the current funding arrangements for HE, appeared to be unaware of means-testing, and believed that all students paid the same amount (indeed, similar findings emerged from Hesketh's (1999) study of working class young people who had gone on to HE). Thus, while Reay *et al.* (2002) distinguish between the material constraints that may impede progress to HE, and the emotional or psychological barriers that some potential students may also face, Archer and Hutchings' study suggests that there may be significant overlap between the two types of constraints: the young people's emotional disposition to HE appears to have affected their perception of possible material constraints.

Such emotional constraints to participating in HE are discussed in some depth by a number of recent studies (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). These provide compelling evidence that for many young people from working class backgrounds, universities and colleges are seen as inherently middle class – and thus, alien – institutions. For a large proportion of the respondents in Archer and Hutchings' study, this perception caused them to position themselves as 'outside' of HE – 'potentially able to take advantage of it, but not the "owners" of it' (p.570). It was also seen as a threat to their sense of identity. Indeed, many of the young people in the study had a strong emotional attachment to their own working class identity, and felt that this was not compatible with an 'academic identity', which they defined as predominantly middle class. Similarly, Walkerdine *et al.* claim that for the young working class woman who does go on to HE, the transition is a distressing process, in which: 'the hopes and aspirations of her and her parents become intertwined with the pain of separation, and therefore a loss or shift of identity' (p.162). This

is contrasted with her middle class peers for whom progress to university is assumed, ‘a rite of passage that most family members had undertaken’ (p.159). However, as educational researchers have frequently pointed out (for example, Ball *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001b), class identities are not homogenised, and are structured by both ethnicity and gender. Indeed, Archer and Hutchings (2000) point to the ways in which the views of some of their respondents conflicted, as they interpreted barriers to their participation differently, using a range of class-, gender- and race-based discourses. Thus, they conclude that although respondents ‘identified similar risks, costs and benefits, and constructed university as a “risky” and “costly” option for working-class students... differences emerged as to how these were evaluated as “worth it” or not’ (p.571).

These studies suggest that social closure in relation to HE may operate through two inter-related mechanisms: first, through the self-exclusion of young people who are reluctant to enter what they perceive to be an alien (and costly) higher education system that offers no certain rewards; and second, through the failure of government to address these structural inequalities that act as barriers to participation in HE. Indeed, as Archer and Hutchings (2000) note: ‘Differential rates of participation in HE both result from, and are intrinsic to the reproduction of class inequalities and processes of exclusion’ (p.557). These themes are pursued further, in relation to the ‘type’ of university to which young people decide to apply, in section 2.3.3, below. The social closure position, supported by the empirical evidence discussed above, certainly provides a more convincing explanation of patterns of access to HE than that offered by liberal theories. However, in section 2.4 I argue that its weakness lies in its inability to account for changes to the social composition of universities over time, or variations in the level of participation by working class students in universities of the same status. Moreover, it offers no explanation of how some young people from social classes IV and V are able to effect change. Although the proportion of such students in HE (and particularly in high status institutions) clearly remains very low, the success of initiatives to widen participation may depend partially on furthering our understanding of what differentiates those young people who do decide to go on to HE from their peers who choose not to. These issues are taken up again in section 2.4.

## 2.3 Establishment of a hierarchy

### 2.3.1 Evidence of a hierarchy

In his historical account of changes within higher education, Anderson (1995) argues that universities and colleges constitute the most egalitarian part of the British education system, on the basis that they have no private equivalent and, within them, students generally mix with others from a range of different social backgrounds. Similarly, Tomlinson (2001) maintains that, prior to 2000, the UK higher education system was characterised by its ‘comprehensive’ nature (p.122). However, as the preceding section may suggest, there is little empirical evidence to support these views. Indeed, the majority of research in this area, whether historical or contemporary, has emphasised the hierarchical nature of the sector and, often, its role in perpetuating social divisions. For example, in his study of higher education between 1870 and 1920, Lowe (1987) asserts that the widely recognised hierarchical nature of universities during this period reflected a similar hierarchy within secondary schools: different sectors of both systems catered for different social groups. Furthermore, Hoare (1991) has described a distinct pecking order of university *regions* based on geographical and economic factors.

However, many have argued that it is only since the 1992 higher education reforms (implemented as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act) that a hierarchy of institutions has gained such significance. During the 1990s, the hierarchical positioning of HEIs became more explicit through the publication in national newspapers of increasing numbers of university league tables. This was facilitated to some extent by the simultaneous growth in the number of ‘performance indicators’ (such as teaching assessment scores, research assessment exercise results, student entry standards and levels of institutional spending) and other, quantifiable data placed in the public domain – purportedly related to the quality of education provided by universities and colleges of HE. Although there are considerable differences between the ranking of specific HEIs in different tables (Bowden, 2000), there are well-established ‘circuits’ (Ball *et al.*, 1997) or groups of universities of different status:

...there are prevailing status distinctions between our institutions of higher education. The binary line is still very much with us, albeit in a shadowy and more permeable form. There is also evidence of a developing ‘super-league’ amongst the research-led

universities, supported through the workings of the Russell Group and similar cliques. (Tight, 2000, p.40)

Research has shown that hierarchical positioning of HEIs is also common amongst graduate recruiters and other employers (Brown and Scase, 1994; Hesketh, 2000). For example, when Brown and Scase asked managers (as well as teachers and members of the public) to name their top ten universities, only twelve university names were mentioned amongst the responses. Thus, the authors assert that graduate employers 'maintain a cognitive map which places Oxford and Cambridge at the apex and work down' (p.44). Further, Dugdale (1997) provides evidence that during the recession of the early 1990s, employers limited their recruitment activities to the 'old' universities: between 1990 and 1994 the fall in graduate employment and rise in unemployment were not nearly as substantial for the old universities as for their new counterparts. He concludes that the 'traditional hierarchy of "Oxbridge", redbrick, plateglass and former polytechnics appears to have become more rather than less entrenched in the current graduate labour market' (p.151).

The evidence about students' awareness of HE hierarchies, prior to arriving at university, is less conclusive (and is discussed further below). Nevertheless, several studies have demonstrated that, once at university, young people quickly develop a strong sense of the position of their own institution in the HE hierarchy (Ainley, 1994; Brown and Scase, 1994). Indeed, in his research at 'Home Counties University' and the contrasting 'Inner City University', Ainley (1994) claims that students at the former saw themselves at a university of second rank (after Oxbridge). However, 'they were also clearly aware of their superior relation to most other HEIs and to the former polytechnics, in particular' (p.55). At 'Inner City University', students 'pick up their perception of their place at the bottom of the hierarchy from their teachers, from any comparison they are able to make with university students on the same courses and the amount of work they are asked to undertake in order to reach the same level from a "lower" starting point' (p.65). Similar conclusions were reached by Brown and Scase (1994) in their comparison of three universities: students from their 'Home Counties University' and 'Inner City University' shared a cognitive map of HEIs with Oxbridge at the apex, and accepted that Oxbridge students would be preferred over them at job interviews. The same hierarchical ordering of institutions was also evident in research conducted by Pitcher and Purcell (1998) and Roberts and Allen (1997).



### 2.3.2 The liberal position

As discussed in Chapter One, recent pronouncements by education ministers have outlined a vision of a more diverse HE sector. David Blunkett, as Secretary of State for Education, called for a 'three tier' sector, comprising research universities, regional universities and community colleges (Thomson, 2000) and similar sentiments have been expressed by Margaret Hodge, in her role as Minister for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning. Despite government assurances that none of these areas of specialisation would be privileged over the others, it seems likely that this kind of diversification may have the effect of exacerbating status differences. Indeed, Tony Blair and other members of the government have frequently alluded to implicit hierarchical positions – for example, in their exhortation to 'top' universities to take more students from poorer backgrounds (Woodward, 2000, 2002), and in the consideration they allegedly gave to allowing 'elite' institutions to charge additional fees (Elliot Major, 2000). Acknowledgement of the different status of universities has also come from within the HE sector. Indeed, a professor at the University of Aberdeen, writing in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* claimed that although 'the official position is that a university is a university...the truth is otherwise, and to pretend to the contrary is like supposing that Lidl and Sainsbury are much the same because they are both supermarkets...of course they are not the same' (Graham, 2002). However, the clearest arguments in favour of a more hierarchical sector have come from institutions near the top of most unofficial hierarchies, particularly those in the 'Russell Group' (a group of eighteen universities, which define themselves as the leading teaching and research universities in the UK). They have argued that they differ from other higher education institutions by virtue of their location within an international rather than a national market. Furthermore, they have campaigned, as a group, for the introduction of differential fees, with the expectation that fees will vary in relation to the 'quality' of the institution. Indeed, Blanchflower and Oswald (2000), two of the contributors to a Russell Group report on HE funding, have commented that: 'some [universities] will be able to set fees high...because of the high quality of their product. If the price is too high for the product on offer, the students will not show up. Most fees will be much lower.'

It could be argued that by offering a means of differentiating between higher education students, a hierarchical HE sector provides an important signal to employers and may, in part, be the result of a rational strategy adopted by these employers to seek out the most able students. It is likely that this would be supported by the 'utilitarian trainers' in Williams'

typology, as well as others who support the technical functional theory of the relationship between education and the economy. Given that around a third of young people now go on to university, employers have a very large pool of graduates from which to recruit employees and need criteria on which to differentiate between students with the same class of degree. It may seem rational for them to make such a judgement based on the university they have attended. For example, various studies have shown the influence of peers on attainment (for example, Thrupp, 1999). Therefore, it may seem logical to assume that students, selected on the basis of high A Level grades, who have studied with others of similar levels of attainment, are likely to reach a higher academic standard than students with lower A Level grades who have studied with others of low attainment levels. This polarising effect is likely to be made greater by the facilities available in the different universities. HEIs requiring, on average, high A Level point scores are usually those with greater financial resources<sup>2</sup>, higher staff-to-student ratios and better facilities when compared to those requiring lower A Level point scores. Thus, if employers believe the hierarchy of HEIs to be a fair and meritocratic means of selecting students on the basis of ability, it may seem logical for them to aim to recruit those who have studied at high status institutions.

However, this argument has several fundamental weaknesses. First, international comparisons indicate that employers in other countries are able to select their graduate employees without the need of such a hierarchical HE sector. Windolf (1995) demonstrates that in Germany, for example, status is rarely attached to the HEI attended, resulting in a much more homogenous university sector (with decisions about institutions made largely on the basis of their location). Second, there are strong reasons why the present hierarchy of HEIs within the UK is not necessarily a good proxy for 'ability'. Various empirical studies of HE choice (which are discussed in section 2.3.3, below) give an indication of some of the factors which distort the supposed relationship between A Level grades and 'rank' or 'circuit' of university attended. These include: family background, social class, gender and ethnicity, as well as level and nature of institutional support. For example, researchers (Ball *et al.*, 2002; Pugsley, 1998; Reay, 1998a) have demonstrated that students do not come to the higher education market with equal awareness of the status of different institutions; the level of their knowledge is closely related to the cultural capital possessed by their families. Furthermore, even if the relationship between a young person's A Level grades and the

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<sup>2</sup> About 30 HEIs gain three-quarters of all public research funds (Blunkett, 2000).

circuit of university he or she attended was strengthened, treating HEIs as a proxy for ability may continue to be problematic due to the significant differences in attainment at 16 and 18 by social class (and, to some extent, by gender and ethnicity) (Drew, 1995). Sociologists such as Saunders (1997) would argue that such differences can be explained by differences of aptitude and motivation between members of different social classes. However, this position has been strongly contested by other researchers. Indeed, Breen and Goldthorpe (1999) reanalysed the dataset used by Saunders (the National Child Development Study) and found that class origins were much more important in explaining class destinations than ability and effort.

A second possible strand of a liberal argument in favour of a hierarchy of universities and colleges may focus on the quality of the learning experience available to individual students and on maximising students' contributions to scholarship and academic debate. Although there is little evidence of the effects of segregation by ability at the higher education level, research within compulsory education suggests that if students are grouped by ability, the attainment of the highest attainers may be increased (Askew and Wiliam, 1995; Kulik and Kulik, 1987; Lauder and Hughes, 1999) and, indeed, this seems to be implicit in some of the statements from the Russell Group universities. However, this argument is subject to similar weaknesses as the economic argument, namely that the HEI hierarchy is unlikely to be a very good proxy for ability, given the various possible distortions to the relationship between A Level grades and rank (and also between 'ability' and A Level grades). Furthermore, evidence from the secondary sector would suggest that the *average* level of attainment may well be suppressed by segregating students in terms of ability in this way (Lauder and Hughes, 1999). However, further work is certainly needed to explore whether these relationships are replicated within higher education institutions.

From this discussion it seems clear that the liberal position offers no more of a convincing explanation of the emergence of a hierarchy of HEIs than it does of the 'purpose' of higher education. While the rhetoric offered by the liberal position may have a role in justifying or perpetuating a hierarchy of institutions, this standpoint offers little explanatory power.

### **2.3.3 The social closure position**

As in the preceding discussion of young people's decisions whether or not to go on to higher education (in section 2.2.3), theories of social closure appear to offer a more convincing

explanation for the emergence of HE hierarchies and, in particular, their increasing prominence since the 1990s. Again, research has indicated the class-based nature of many of the differences between young people in their approach to HE hierarchies, but also the ways in which such differences are structured by ethnicity and gender. In exploring these differences, Ball *et al.*'s (2001) distinction between 'contingent' choosers and 'embedded' choosers is helpful. Contingent choosers are typically those from working class families with no prior experience of higher education, while embedded choosers have parents who attended university and, for these young people, higher education is an expected route after school or college. Although the authors note that these 'ideal types' are simple binaries and should not be mistaken for descriptive categories, they provide a useful framework for discussing the available empirical evidence and for investigating what Ball *et al.* categorize as the 'two different discourses of choice'.

Various studies suggest that, for 'contingent choosers', institutional choices are constrained by: their awareness and understanding of higher education hierarchies; a range of material factors; and various emotional or psychological responses to universities of a particular status. Recent research has revealed markedly different levels of awareness of HE hierarchies amongst respondents, closely related to the socio-economic status of their families (Ball *et al.*, 2002; Pugsley, 1998; Reay, 1998a). Pugsley, for example, describes the differences in the role played by working class families and their middle class counterparts. Within many of the middle class families in her study (equivalent to the 'embedded choosers' in Ball *et al.*'s typology), success was defined in terms of going on to what was perceived as a 'good' university, and both parents and young people were aware of a three-tier hierarchy of HEIs. In contrast, in working class families, parents viewed all universities as 'ivory towers' and spoke of higher education as an 'alien environment' (p.79). However, the evidence on this point is not conclusive: Hutchings and Archer (2001), for example, argue that it was this very understanding of the hierarchical positioning of universities, combined with a belief that only the lower status institutions were open to them, that dissuaded many of the working class young people in their research from entering higher education.

Even amongst those who are aware of the position of particular institutions in the HE hierarchy, there is strong evidence to suggest that the options of 'contingent' choosers are limited by a number of material constraints. Recent data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) shows strong income-related differences in the distance students

travel to attend university. For example, in 1999 students from high-income families travelled an average of 74 miles to university, while their counterparts from the lowest income band travelled an average of only 28 miles (UCAS, 2000a). Likely explanations for these differences are suggested by the findings of qualitative studies of choice. Reay (1998a), for example, found that her respondents from working class backgrounds were constrained by geographical factors in ways that her middle class respondents were not. Indeed, Ball *et al.* (2001) and Reay *et al.* (2001b) have highlighted the narrowly defined 'socio-scapes' and spatial horizons of their 'contingent choosers'. For some of these young people, local choices reflected a positive view of family and community relationships and a desire to maintain these whilst at university (Ball *et al.*, 2001; Pugsley, 1998; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). However, for others, local choices were necessitated by financial constraints (such as the cost of travel and accommodation, and the need to maintain part-time employment) (Reay *et al.*, 2001b) and, for many young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, a concern about the ethnic mix of institutions in other parts of the country (Ball *et al.*, 2001).

Empirical studies have also highlighted the complex ways in which emotional or psychological factors may compound these material constraints. Research conducted by Ball, Reay and colleagues provides clear evidence of what they call 'class-matching', processes whereby certain types of institution are seen as 'not for people like me'. On this basis, traditional universities were often discounted by working class students (Reay *et al.*, 2001b), while the choices of middle class students attending private schools, were often limited to *only* these institutions (Ball *et al.*, 2002). Thus, the choices of 'embedded' choosers are not necessarily any wider or 'freer' than those of the contingent choosers. Indeed, Reay *et al.* (2001b) emphasise the importance for *all* students, of choosing somewhere that they think they will feel safe and happy:

Most of the students are applying to low risk universities where if they are from an ethnic minority there is an ethnic mix, if they are privileged they will find intellectual and social peers, and if they are mature students there is a high percentage of mature students. (p.865)

However, although this suggests that the choices of all young people are constrained to a similar extent, the importance attributed to HEI status in the labour market and in other areas

of life (discussed in section 2.3.1 above) ensures that similar degrees of social closure may result in very different degrees of choice within the labour market.

In many ways, these emotional or psychological ‘constraints’ faced by contingent choosers appear to be exacerbated by the schools and colleges they attend. While the confident young women (showing many characteristics of ‘embedded choosers’) described by Roker (1993), in her study of an elite private school, were encouraged to apply for high status subjects at high status institutions, contingent choosers are less likely to attend educational institutions with such expectations. Further, Reay *et al.* (2001a) argue that there are specific institutional effects on HE choice, which operate over and above the influence of family background. Indeed, they claim that ‘perceptions and expectations of choice are constructed over time in relation to school friends’ and teachers’ views and advice and learning experiences no less than in relationship to the views and expectations of families’ (para. 1.3). Like Roker, they point to the acute awareness of university hierarchies within private schools and the sense of spatial proximity to elite HEIs transmitted by such institutions. In contrast, the state schools and colleges in their study had close relationships with some of the new universities but were much more distant from Oxbridge and other high status institutions (findings that also emerged from Pugsley’s (1998) study). However, differences between schools and colleges are not related solely to their private or state status. Ball *et al.* (2002) demonstrate how the accuracy of young people’s rankings of HEIs corresponds, not only to level of parental knowledge, but to: the relative prominence given to higher education choice within each specific school or college; the extent to which applications to high status universities are encouraged; and the different amounts of time, expertise and levels of support devoted to HE choice in the different institutions. This leads the authors to conclude that ‘institutional habitus’ may operate as an independent variable in HE decision-making. However, as studies of secondary school choice have shown, the processes adopted by schools generally reflect their SES mix (Lauder and Hughes, 1999; Thrupp, 1999), suggesting that institutional habitus may well serve to reinforce implicit messages about HE emanating from the home.

While the distinction between ‘embedded’ and ‘contingent’ choosers is essentially grounded in class-based differences, recent research has shown that this binary may be cross-cut to some extent by differences of race and/or ethnicity. Although several researchers have painted a very positive picture of ethnic minority representation in higher education (Allen, 1998; Modood, 1998), it is clear that patterns of both application and representation differ

significantly between ethnic groups (Connor *et al.*, 1996b; Modood, 1993). Moreover, ethnic minority students are typically concentrated in a small number of HE institutions (particularly the former polytechnics) – while other universities and colleges have very small ethnic minority populations (Bird, 1996; Connor *et al.*, 1996; Reay *et al.*, 2001b). Modood (1998) has suggested that is a result of a positive choice on the behalf of young people from ethnic minorities. However, the narratives of some of the young people in Reay *et al.*'s (2001b) research suggest that their perceptions about the ethnic mix of certain institutions operated as a further constraint to HE choices. Although the researchers are careful to make clear that responses differed considerably between respondents, some institutions were rejected because of a perceived lack of tolerance of difference. Indeed, as the authors note, judgements about the 'good university' were both racialised and classed and 'although in the main they conform to mainstream evaluations as evidenced in official league tables, they also allude to the problems inherent in going places "where there are few people like me"' (p.865).

As discussed above, both the growth in unofficial university league tables since the early 1990s and empirical research on recruitment practices suggest that status differences between higher education institutions have become increasingly important over the past decade. This is fully consonant with theories of social closure, which would suggest that as the number of young people who enter higher education increases, the value of a degree as a mark of distinction is likely to decline (Brown, 1997). Instead, emphasis shifts to the institution from which it was awarded, as well as to the acquisition of a higher degree. Morley (1997), for example, suggests that the terms 'old' and 'new' when applied to universities provide new codes for insider and outsider discourses, reflecting Bourdieu's (1984) contention that culturally arbitrary qualifications can change their worth as badges of distinction for different social groups. Similarly, Ainley (1994) has argued that as degrees are needed for more and more jobs, 'educational credentials assume a new importance in achieving or sustaining cultural distinctions in the absence of any clear-cut divisions between the formerly manual working class and the traditional non-manual middle class' (p.23). The university attended thus becomes an important way of distinguishing between degrees of the same class: 'degree-holders stand "relative" to one another in a hierarchy of academic and social worth.... a degree from Oxbridge or an Ivy League University is judged to have greater "capital" value than one from a little known university or college in the market for jobs' (Brown, 1997, p.741). Scott (1995) makes a similar argument, asserting that 'mass systems are... more static

systems which entrench and legitimate social hierarchies, while elite systems offered upward avenues for able working class students' (p.173).

## **2.4 A third position? – developing Bourdieu's model**

As I have indicated above, liberal explanations of the 'purpose' of higher education and the emergence of an HE hierarchy seem unable to account for the high level of social inequality within the sector. Indeed, this chapter and Chapter One have both shown how the advantage of the middle classes has been maintained in access to HE, generally, as well as in entry to high status institutions. I have argued that a more convincing explanation is provided by theories of social closure, and it is these that underpin much of the recent empirical work in this area. Research has suggested that, for many young people, HE decision-making involves (amongst other things) a process of 'class-matching' (Ball *et al.*, 2002) whereby the perceived middle class culture of higher education institutions – and particularly those deemed to be of high status – attracts those young people from middle class backgrounds and deters those from working class backgrounds.

### **2.4.1 Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction**

In many ways, the processes of 'class matching' outlined in the empirical studies discussed above seem to be a good illustration of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of 'cultural reproduction'. This posits that essentially arbitrary symbols are imposed upon society by dominant groups so as to appear 'legitimate'. Thus, certain social groups are subjected to what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic violence' (through, for example, being treated as inferior, denied access to resources and limited in their aspirations) but, they themselves, do not perceive it in this way. To these groups, their situation is legitimate and in accordance with what they assume to be 'the natural order of things' and, thus, the power relations that make the imposition possible remain masked. For example, in relation to the education system, Bourdieu argues that the culture of schools and colleges (conveyed through the language used and teaching styles adopted within them) is essentially that of the ruling classes (what he calls the 'cultural arbitrary'). These institutions then perpetuate this dominant culture. They also reinforce social inequalities by failing to take account of the different amounts of 'cultural capital' possessed by their pupils. Thus, young people from middle class backgrounds, who are at ease with the language used within educational establishments, the behaviour expected of them, and the values intrinsic to 'doing well' at school and college



have an advantage over their working class peers, who, Bourdieu argues, have had considerably less access to dominant cultural forms. Further, he maintains that by treating *social* gifts as *natural* gifts, pupils from middle class families come to be seen (by themselves, teachers and other pupils) as more naturally intelligent; for this group of young people, privilege is translated directly into merit. This then has implications for the way in which students perceive their educational future and their assessment of their chances of progressing to higher education. Indeed, Bourdieu (1976) stresses the cumulative nature of educational disadvantage, and the critical importance of a child's early experiences of school.

To explain the processes through which these wider structural inequalities are mediated through to the individual level, Bourdieu develops the idea of 'habitus'. This is an 'acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted' (1977, p.95), a set of values and dispositions that is derived mainly from experience, habits and the process of internalising external constraints and possibilities. These values let us respond to situations in different ways, as they allow for improvisations, but responses are always largely determined by our social location. Bourdieu thus contends that it is through the habitus, or an individual's 'subjective expectations of objective probabilities', that the structure of culture and society is reproduced. Indeed, the extent to which a young person's habitus fits with that of the school, college or university will have consequences for their success in acquiring the values of that specific educational institution, and being seen to perform well within it.

#### **2.4.2 Limitations of the theory**

However, as I have suggested earlier in this chapter, theories of social closure and particularly Bourdieu's concept of cultural reproduction, do not seem adequate to explain some of the (limited) mobility within the higher education system. For example, although young people from working class backgrounds are significantly under-represented within both HE as a whole and high status HEIs, Bourdieu's theory does not explain how some young people from such backgrounds are nonetheless able to access HE and elite universities. Similarly, it does not account for differences in the social composition of universities of the same status. League tables of the 'access elite', published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (Goddard, 2002), have shown that there are significant variations between high status institutions in the extent to which they have attracted young people from non-traditional backgrounds. Furthermore, Bourdieu's theory provides no explanation of the

changes to the social class profile of specific universities over time, such as the decline in the proportion of Oxbridge entrants from state-funded schools –from 64 per cent in 1978 to 42 per cent in 1985 (Sutton Trust, 1998).

In his discussion of the role of the education system in perpetuating class inequalities, Bourdieu (1976) argues that a small degree of mobility is necessary to legitimate processes of cultural reproduction (and notes that teachers often, unknowingly, collude in this themselves – their own social mobility giving ‘credence to the myth of the school as a liberating force...by giving the impression that success is exclusively a matter of gifts and work’ (p.116)). However, it is not clear from his theorising what distinguishes those who ‘escape the collective fate of their class’ (p.116) from other young people. While this is not a central concern of Bourdieu’s theory, it would seem that these anomalies are nonetheless of considerable interest. Nash (1999) claims that if five per cent of working class children succeed in the education system, there must be a working class habitus that makes this possible. In line with the broad thrust of Nash’s argument, I would suggest that exploring the ways in which some young people from less privileged backgrounds are able to change their dispositions, beliefs and other aspects of their habitus may have relevance to the ‘widening participation’ agenda, as well as to sociological understanding of agency and processes of change. However, there is considerable debate about the extent to which Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus is able to account for radical change. Jenkins (1992) and Shilling (1993), for example, emphasise its durability, arguing that Bourdieu’s insistence on its unreflexive nature, and role in conditioning learning and social experience throughout life make it ‘almost immune to major upset’ (Jenkins, 1992, p.79). Others, however, have contested this interpretation of Bourdieu’s work and have emphasised, instead, the transformative potential of the habitus. May (1996), for example, stresses the way in which habitus is structured through practical experience, through gaining a ‘feel for the game’, while Mahar *et al.* (1990) emphasize the fluidity of habitus as an individual moves through different contexts. Although Bourdieu clearly acknowledges that habitus can change during a person’s lifetime, I would concur with Jenkins (1992) that the lack of theoretical explanation of how this may happen remains a weakness in his theory.

### **2.4.3 Developing Bourdieu’s model**

Although I have argued above that Bourdieu’s work emphasises the reproductive role of habitus, rather than its transformative potential, a number of educational researchers who

have drawn upon his work provide a more convincing explanation of how habitus may change. For example, in her work on mothers' involvement in their children's primary schooling, Reay (1998b, 1998c) discusses the ways in which working class women (with no experience of their own mothers being involved in their education) were attempting to transform their habitus and become more involved with their own children. She acknowledges that it 'is the powerful influence of mothers' own educational experiences which permeate their practices and shapes their responses to the educational field' (p.66). However, she also recognises that a change from a negative disposition towards education (as a schoolgirl) to a positive one (as a mother) is both possible and an explanation of the desire to become involved. Transforming the habitus is shown to be a much harder undertaking than merely replicating it (which characterised the practices of most middle class mothers in the study) due to an inequitable distribution of cultural, social and economic resources, but Reay shows that it is indeed possible. A number of other empirical studies have provided further evidence of the ways in which habitus can be changed – again, in relation to the involvement of working class mothers in their daughters' education (Mann, 1998), and also through the changing relationship to education of mature working class students (Merrill, 1999).

Hodkinson's studies of career decision-making (1996, 1997, 1998) also draw extensively on Bourdieu's work in exploring the interplay of structure and agency. However, in common with Reay, he also investigates the ways in which habitus can develop, and as a result, gives more weight to agency than Bourdieu and constructs a much less deterministic account of young people's choices. This is most apparent in his concept of 'turning points'. From his data on young people's career decisions, he identifies three distinct turning points at which young people go through 'a significant change of identity' (1998, p.101):

*Structural* turning points are determined by external structures of the institutions involved. One such structural change is when young people have to choose whether to stay in full time education or leave. Other turning points are *self-initiated*, that is, the person concerned is instrumental in precipitating a transformation, in response to a range of factors in his/her personal life in the field. Finally, turning points are *forced* on some by the action of others. (ibid., p.101)

In both these cases, rational decision-making and the idea of ‘conscious choice’ seem to be acknowledged (although in practice they are often constrained by objective structures). I would argue that this diverges significantly from Bourdieu’s own model, although neither Reay nor Hodgkinson explicitly refer to this divergence and may consider their theoretical frameworks to be entirely consistent with his. However, it would seem that by making these adjustments to the theory, it is able to transcend the structure-agency dualism more effectively and thus make a more substantial contribution to explaining elements of social mobility as well as the more durable aspects of student representation within HE. These themes will be pursued in more depth, in relation to the evidence from this study, in Chapter Five.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored some of the theoretical issues which impinge upon an empirical study of HE choice, considering the extent to which a ‘choice’ is possible, as well as broader debates about the relationship between education, the economy and social mobility. I have argued that most of the discourses relating to the ‘purpose’ of the higher education system are underpinned by one of two competing theoretical explanations: a liberal/technocratic position (most evident in the language of politicians and policy-makers) and a competing social closure position. I have argued, on the basis of the empirical research discussed in this chapter, that young people’s HE choices can be more adequately explained by the latter. The chapter has also explored the emergence of a hierarchy of higher education institutions and the increasing significance of the ‘position’ of particular universities since the early 1990s. I have explored possible liberal explanations for such a hierarchy, and the competing explanation, based on ideas about social closure. Again, while the liberal position is more consonant with some of the ‘official’ discourses about the status of universities and colleges of HE (particularly in the arguments put forward by the Russell Group), theories of social closure show a much better fit with the available empirical evidence.

However, I have also argued that both the liberal position and the competing argument grounded upon social closure are inadequate to explain: the mobility of a limited number of students within an essentially reproductive system; differences in the social class profile of universities of a similar status; and changes to the profiles of specific institutions over time. While acknowledging that elements of mobility are in some ways necessary to theories of

social closure, I have argued that exploring further the mechanisms through which certain young people are able to ‘escape the collective fate of their class’ may itself be of value – and have discussed a number of studies that have explored the ways in which parents and young people have attempted to change their ‘habitus’. These theoretical debates, which have been outlined in this chapter, provide the context for the research described in subsequent chapters of this thesis and, in particular, the ideas about hierarchies that are developed in Chapter Five.

In reviewing the empirical evidence on processes of HE choice, this chapter has explored the role of young people’s structural location (particularly their social class but also, to some extent, their ethnicity) and how these influences are played out within the family and the educational institutions that young people attend. However, despite Reay *et al.*’s (2001a) acknowledgement that: ‘higher education applicants are located within a matrix of influences which are best represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution’ (para. 1.6), very few studies have explored in any detailed way the role played by young people’s friends and peers as they engage with the higher education market. Several studies of HE choice have certainly alluded to the role played by friends and peers (Ball *et al.*, 2001; David *et al.*, 2001a; Reay *et al.*, 2001a) and given some indication of the perceived importance young people attribute to this role (Allen, 1998; Connor *et al.*, 1999). However, the precise nature of the influence has not been explored. As outlined in Chapter One, this research intends to address this gap in the literature by focussing explicitly on the influence of friends and peers on the decision-making process and, in Chapter Three, I discuss several of the methodological issues that were central to this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE. A LONGITUDINAL, QUALITATIVE STUDY: A DISCUSSION OF METHODS**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I discuss two key components of my research design: the longitudinal nature of the study and the decisions I made about sampling. I argue that a longitudinal, qualitative design was particularly appropriate for exploring young people's decision-making processes and the changes to their friendships over time and discuss a number of issues related to the use of this method. These include the changing nature of relationships between interviewer and interviewee and the extent to which being part of such a project impacts upon respondents' lives. I then go on to look at two cross-cutting themes which affected the design itself, as well as the ongoing analysis and interpretation of data. The first explores a number of methodological issues specific to researching friendships, while the second is concerned with my approach to contradictions and inconsistencies within the data. Drawing on respondents' reflections on being part of the project, I argue that inconsistencies within the data are not necessarily problematic and, instead, that they can be used productively to aid the process of analysis. Finally, I discuss a number of ethical considerations that affected the research.

In common with several other researchers who have conducted ethnographic or longitudinal qualitative research (Phoenix, 1994; Skeggs, 1994), in the final interview with each of my respondents I asked them how they had felt about being part of the study and whether they believed it had had any impact on any aspect of their lives. All attempts at reflexivity, on behalf on both researcher and respondent are obviously highly partial and, as Atkinson (1996) notes, should certainly not be seen as embodying a "“true” and transparently unvarnished account’ (p.55). Nevertheless, the young people's responses did help me to both interpret and contextualise some of the data from previous rounds of interviews. Indeed, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1993) suggest:

We can minimize reactivity and/or monitor it. But we can also exploit it: how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react to other situations. Indeed, rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher completely, we should set about understanding them (p.18).

It is in this spirit that I draw on the young people's reflections to illustrate and illuminate some of the methodological issues discussed in this chapter.

## **3.2 A longitudinal study**

### **3.2.1 Choosing a longitudinal study**

One of the primary aims of my research was to track young people's decision-making processes about higher education between the ages of 16 and 18 and to explore the impact, if any, of their friends and wider peer group. A longitudinal study seemed particularly appropriate for this purpose. First, it allowed me to chart changes, in a detailed manner, over the two-year period. By interviewing the young people each term (see Appendix 4), I could ask them about their plans for when they finished their sixth-form studies, as well as their perceptions of events over the previous couple of months. This allowed me to plot reasonably accurately the points at which changes were made and to identify the reasons for such changes. Furthermore, as each interview covered a relatively short time span, problems with recall were minimised; students were able to recount, without much difficulty, how their thinking about higher education had evolved over the term. The frequency of the interviews was particularly important with respect to questions about discussions with friends. Informal, and often short, conversations with friends about universities and colleges are unlikely to have been perceived as significant events by the young people themselves; equally, it is unlikely that they would have been able to recall these in much detail after a lengthy period of time. However, by interviewing respondents every term, they were able to describe in considerable detail what they had talked about with their friends over the previous two months.

Over the course of the two years, the interviews covered a wide range of topics (see Appendix 6 for examples of the interview schedules). Some issues were raised by the young people themselves and others were brought up by me and informed by the literature, theoretical concerns, previous rounds of interviews and my ongoing data analysis. Typically, the interviews covered the young people's: experiences at college; plans for the future; friendships; relationships with girlfriends and boyfriends; families; and, to some extent, their activities outside college (including work and leisure pursuits). During the sixth and final round of interviews, I asked the young people to reflect on their involvement in the project and talk about how they had felt during the interviews and whether they believed that being

part of the project had had any impact on any decisions they made, their relationships with others, or any other part of their lives. Their responses to these questions are used to illustrate some of the methodological issues discussed in the chapter, and also informed my reading of the data from previous rounds of interviews.

### **3.2.2 Establishing relationships – the anomalous position of the longitudinal researcher**

Within the research methods literature, there are few discussions of the position of the longitudinal researcher conducting a qualitative study. There are many accounts of the position of the ethnographer or participant observer, fully engaged in the research setting for long periods at a time, and also of the researcher in ‘one-off’ qualitative interviews. Few, however, address the particular problems, but also the benefits, associated with regular but infrequent contact with respondents over a reasonably long period. Unlike an ethnographer, I did not assume a particular role within the college on a day-to-day basis. However, unlike researchers conducting one-off interviews, I did spend a considerable amount of time in the college, arranging or conducting interviews with students and staff and collecting relevant documents. This rather anomalous position did, I believe, lead to the formation of a very particular kind of relationship with the respondents. Although almost all were extremely talkative during the interviews, as well as willing to discuss a number of potentially sensitive topics with considerable openness, they were much less talkative when I encountered them outside the interview situation and I gained very little data from them from these ‘chance’ encounters. This was not entirely unexpected. Although I took a number of steps to ensure that they did not associate me with a position of authority in the college (stressing my status as a university student, wearing informal clothes and choosing a room for the interviews that was used primarily by visitors from outside the college), I made no attempt to try to establish friendships with the young people, recognising that I would be spending relatively little time with each individual student.

Although the relationships that I established with the students did not allow me to collect much informal data (in contrast to that which may be open to the ethnographer), it had compensatory benefits. I would suggest that students were perhaps more sure of my ability to keep certain issues confidential than if I was spending time with their whole friendship group on a day-to-day basis. For example, several made negative comments about their ‘best friends’ to me, and others explained how they had chosen to conceal various decisions from their friends (indeed, this is a central theme of Chapter Six). If I had been perceived as a



‘friend’ to these ‘best friends’, as an ethnographer or participant observer might, it seems possible that respondents may not have been as forthcoming and willing to confide. As it was, they knew that I did not have any particular bonds with any specific individuals within their friendship group. Furthermore, as a perceived ‘outsider’ to the friendship group, respondents often spent considerable time explaining the dynamics of their group to me. This was extremely useful in understanding their perspective on their friends and the various inter-relationships. If I had been part of the group, respondents may have considered these kinds of descriptions unnecessary. Finally, by maintaining the distinction between researcher and friend, I was able to explore a number of different friendship groups. Both Morris-Roberts (2000) and Glesne (1989) have described how, by making alliances with certain groups of friends, they automatically distanced themselves from others. Penetrating a number of different friendship groups was of central importance to my research design – and the anomalous position of longitudinal researcher facilitated this well.

### **3.2.3 Changing relationships**

As the rounds of interviews progressed, it became clear that my relationship with the students was changing. It seems to me that this is inevitable in longitudinal studies that rely on qualitative, in-depth interviews. On my part, I came to know the young people better, developed a greater understanding of their friendship networks and became more aware of their social contexts, as well as the language they used to talk about these aspects of their lives. It was also apparent that considerable changes were taking place in their perception of the research and of me. As they became more familiar with me and the type of questions I was likely to ask them, it was noticeable that they were more relaxed in the interviews and, in many cases, became more talkative – giving longer answers to questions and sometimes anticipating the kind of prompts I often used. The regular contact with students also allowed me a considerable amount of time to gain their trust. I believe this resulted in an increasing willingness to discuss potentially sensitive information over the period of the interviews.

Although this evolving relationship had many benefits for the research process, it was not unproblematic. As the relationships changed, so did the quality of data that was produced in each interview, alluded to above. This made comparisons over time more difficult, as I could not assume I was comparing similar interactions. For example, interviews at the beginning of the two-year period were generally more formal than those towards the end, with me asking more questions. In many cases, by the end of the research period, the interaction

resembled more of an unstructured conversation, with the young people taking more of the initiative and speaking at greater length and in more depth about each issue. As a result, recognising these differences and making them explicit became an important part of the data analysis. It was equally important to recognise that the lens through which I was interpreting the interviews was also changing. As I became more aware of the culture in which they were operating, the language they used and their taken-for-granted assumptions, my interpretation of the data changed, adding to the complexity of analysis. This is discussed further below.

### **3.2.4 Changing behaviour?**

Throughout the research, I was conscious that my own involvement in the young people's lives, over a two-year period, may have had some impact not only on how they talked about their HE decisions but also on the decisions themselves. Repeated interviewing may affect the behaviour and attitudes of respondents and/or motivate them (either consciously or subconsciously) to behave differently (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Riley, 1963). Furthermore, I was concerned that by categorising my questions in certain ways, I may have determined how they thought about HE-related issues. I explored this possible 'measurement effect' with the young people during the final round of interviews. Although it is clearly the case that all attempts at reflexivity, on the part of both researcher and respondent, are highly partial, the young people's responses do at least highlight some of the different ways in which they perceived the research, and give some indication of its impact on their lives.

Two of the young people involved in the research, Jim and Sunita, both believed that being part of the project had had some effect on their decisions with regards to higher education:

Jim: It opened my mind a bit. I haven't really had such an in-depth conversation with anyone else about such a wide variety of things.....it just opened my mind a bit because it sort of pushed me....cos by saying it myself, like 'I haven't really looked into such and such', it made me think 'Ah, so maybe I should do that'....I wouldn't say it's a bad thing, though. But if you wanted to know whether it affected me: yes, it did. (Interview 6)

Jim: It was a sensitive subject for me and I was putting it off as long as I could. You kick started me! (Interview 6)

Sunita: It did make me think a bit cos you were asking so many questions. I thought, 'You're more worried about us than we are!' The college didn't seem very keen or anything and I wanted to make decisions and things and I thought I should be making them because you're interviewing us and I thought 'She's asking us questions probably because we've got to make decisions or something', you know.  
(Interview 6)

Sunita: I think with the project and everything, it's made me think.... It's made me think 'Where am I going to go with all this?' and 'What will I do when I'm older?' (Interview 6)

In contrast, however, the majority of the young people in the study claimed that the research had had a negligible impact on their lives. Becky and Zoë were typical of this group:

Becky: It was so long between interviews that I tended to sort of forget about it and get on with the whole university thing.  
(Interview 6)

Zoë: You always asked me if I'd thought much about university and I'd say 'Not really!' and the next time I didn't think 'Oh, I'd better make sure I think about it', so: 'Have you thought much about university?' 'No!' So it didn't really. (Interview 6)

It is obviously unwise to base judgements about measurement effects solely on what the young people said in their final interview. Nevertheless, their reflections can be corroborated with other evidence from over the two-year period. For example, between the first and second interviews a substantial proportion of the students had given little consideration to universities or colleges, even though they had been aware of the focus of my research. Some had given it very little thought even by the third interview. These students appeared to have no problems talking about this in the interviews, often claiming that it was too early to start thinking about such choices. Furthermore, it was clear from the surprise that greeted some of my telephone calls to arrange interviews, that some of the young people had forgotten about the project between rounds of interviews. Indeed, it would seem that for many of the young

people – although certainly not all – the research assumed a very low profile in their lives (see also Vincent and Warren, 2001).

It is possible that what the students knew of my own HE choices may also have affected their responses and behaviour. I had told all the students at the time of my initial presentations to their tutor groups that I was a postgraduate at Southampton University – but had not revealed any further details about where I had studied as an undergraduate or the influences on my own decision-making processes. Their awareness that I was studying at Southampton University may have made them less inclined to voice criticisms of this particular institution. For example, one of the young men involved in the research, Paul, was careful to check that I had not attended either Portsmouth University or Southampton Institute before he made negative comments about them. Nevertheless, there is evidence from other students (such as Charlotte, Jim and Rich) that they were as prepared to discuss disadvantages with Southampton University as with any other institution. Furthermore, I doubt whether my presence caused them to think any more seriously about the university as an option than they would have done otherwise. Emily Davies College already had a strong relationship with Southampton University, sending a considerable number of students there each year (see Appendix 1), and the two institutions had also formed a Compact.<sup>3</sup>

### **3.2.5 Ongoing analysis of data**

One of the practical advantages of a longitudinal study is that it allows omissions in data collection to be rectified in subsequent interviews (Douglas, 1976). It also enables the researcher to collect more information about individuals than may be possible with other methods, as questions can be spread over more than one interview. I found a further strength of a longitudinal approach to be the way in which it can be combined with ongoing analysis to facilitate an iterative process of conceptual development. Analysis after each round of interviews led, inductively, to a number of theoretical or conceptual formulations that could then be related to the literature and tested more thoroughly and explored in greater depth, in a more deductive manner, in subsequent interviews. Moreover, it allowed me to add an additional research question (discussed in Chapter One) after the first round of interviews,

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<sup>3</sup> Compacts are agreements between universities and local schools and colleges. As part of the scheme, universities agree to consider as special cases students recommended by their school or college whose personal, domestic or social circumstances may adversely affect their demonstrating their full academic potential.

and thus explore a theme that I had not initially anticipated.

Again, these strengths of the approach are not unproblematic. First, the iterative process of conceptual development has a significant impact upon the interpretation of data. Data collected at later stages of the study may be viewed in terms of themes identified earlier in the study, rather than interpreted in its own right. Furthermore, this iterative process may result in more weight being given to data collected in the early stages of the research than that resulting from later interviews. To counter these potential tendencies, each round of interviews was first analysed as a discrete set, before being related to themes from previous rounds. However, it is naïve to assume that my own theoretical and conceptual thinking remained static throughout the research process. Changes are inevitable over a two-year period as a result of, amongst others, changing relationships with respondents, awareness of themes from previous rounds of interviews and reading and re-reading of other theoretical and empirical work in the area. It was also the case that some of the young people's responses during the last round of interviews, about the impact of the research on their lives (see above) and the way in which they presented themselves during the interviews (see section 3.5, below), caused me to return to transcripts from previous rounds and reanalyse data. For example, knowing that both Jim and Sunita felt that the timing of their decisions had been affected by being part of the project helped me to contextualise and interpret some of the data from their previous interviews. Changing interpretations of the data in this way should not be seen as necessarily problematic – but as a rigorous and creative process of interrogation.

### **3.3 Choosing the sample**

As outlined in Chapter One, the aim of my research was to look in a detailed way at young people's decision-making processes and to set these within the context of their families, their sixth-form college and, particularly, their friendship and wider peer groups. I believed that this approach, with its emphasis on both the individual and the context within which he or she was located, would help me to explore some of the complexity of the decision-making process. Furthermore, emphasis on a small number of students within one college would allow me to collect more detailed and accurate data than would have been possible with a larger sample. My research questions helped me to decide on three main dimensions to my research design: its longitudinal nature, its emphasis on a small number of cases and its

reliance on qualitative interviews as the primary method of data collection. Within this framework, I was required to make two main decisions about my sample: how I would choose the institution at which to conduct the research and how I would select the students.

### **3.3.1 Choosing the institution**

Although the college itself was the focus of research only in as far as it gave a context to the young people's choices, provided some advice about higher education and facilitated the formation of friendship groups, the choice of institution was, nevertheless, important. The decision to conduct the study in a sixth-form college rather than a school sixth form was based on the premise that in a college I would be likely to have access to students from a wider range of backgrounds than in a school sixth form. Further education colleges and tertiary colleges were also rejected, on the basis that the average attainment level of young people in sixth-form colleges is generally higher than in the other two types of institution. As a result, it was likely that a greater proportion of young people would be considering going on to higher education. In addition to providing a larger pool of students from which to choose interviewees, I felt it was more likely that decisions about higher education would be discussed between friends than in a college where only a small minority expect to progress to higher education. For similar reasons, I limited my choice to institutions with a relatively large annual intake of students and a high level of university entry. Obviously, these decisions have a significant impact on the extent to which my study is generalizable to young people in other contexts. This is discussed further, below.

Given the practical constraints imposed by a PhD study, particularly in terms of the time available to conduct fieldwork and the finances to fund travel, the choice of college was limited to those within reasonable travelling distance of the University of Southampton. Furthermore, it seemed sensible to choose an area in which sixth-form colleges were the main form of post-16 provision. This increased the likelihood that the students at the college would come from as wide a cross-section of backgrounds as possible. When combined with my other criteria, this had the effect of narrowing my choice to one or two specific institutions. I eventually chose Emily Davies College (a pseudonym), a large sixth-form college in Hampshire. Details about the college, including historical patterns of HE entry and the exam performance of its students, are given in Appendix 1.

### **3.3.2 Choosing students – or students choosing?**

#### *My choices*

In common with my choice of institution, the sample of students was not chosen to be necessarily representative. My aim was to explore in a detailed way the operations of a particular set of social processes in a specified context and to develop explanations of these processes. As a result, my sample of students was designed to provide a close-up and detailed view of specific variables that were relevant to my research questions; part of the process of ‘theoretical sampling’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I chose students with different levels of attainment and studying a number of different subjects. My sample also included both young men and young women, and students from a number of different friendship groups. These characteristics linked to particular themes in the literature, such as gender differences in the involvement of friends in decision-making, as well as to other issues that I was keen to explore such as the impact, if any, of academic attainment on discussions about HE within the friendship group. In total, I chose fifteen students to take part in my research. This was a small enough number to allow regular in-depth interviews, but large enough to include some of the different variables discussed above as well as representatives from a number of different friendship groups.

Hey (1997) describes the difficulty of researching friendship groups in educational settings because of the way in which such groups are usually fragmented during the day as a result of setting, streaming and subject choice. It is also the case that over the period of a longitudinal or ethnographic study, friendships may change as a result of this fragmentation. However, this presented less of a problem at Emily Davies College than it may have done in some other institutions as students were assigned to tutor groups on the basis of secondary school attended and, to some extent, subject choice. Thus, in many cases, groups of friends from secondary school were allocated to the same group (this was the case for: Zoë and Charlotte; Steve, Mark and Rich; and Jenny and Sunita). This had two main effects on the research. First, from a purely pragmatic perspective, it made accessing friendship groups easier: I was able to target groups of friends by talking to a small number of tutor groups. Second, it is likely that it had a considerable impact on the friendships themselves. In addition to subject classes and breaks, students had one 30-minute period a day (the ‘tutor’ period) in which they

could meet up with their friends<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps without this time to consolidate friendships from secondary school, young people would have had more incentive to make new friends. (This is discussed in more depth, in relation to changes in friendship groups, in Chapter Six.)

Given this structure, I looked through the individual records of all students who had recently commenced the first year of their sixth form studies. On the basis of the students' GCSE attainment, their A Level subjects, their previous schools and the gender balance of tutor groups, I decided to approach two tutor groups which, taken together, gave me access to students with a range of different characteristics. I then gave a brief presentation about my research to the two groups, asked all the first year students to complete a short questionnaire about their friends (see Appendix 5) and then asked for volunteers to take part in the project.

The fifteen young people who formed my eventual sample (see Table 3 and also Appendices 2 and 3) were in many ways typical of the wider student body at Emily Davies College. Only one young person (Sunita) came from an ethnic minority background, in line with the small proportion of ethnic minority students in the college as a whole (five per cent). The average level of academic attainment amongst the sample was higher than that of the college as a whole<sup>5</sup> but, within this, the range of attainment was reasonably wide (with A Level point scores ranging from two to thirty-eight). As Table 3 demonstrates, most of the young people in the sample came from a broadly lower middle class background and only three of the fifteen came from families with any prior experience of higher education. Emily Davies College does not keep any data on students' social class or level of parental education. Nevertheless, evidence from teachers and careers advisers within the college suggests that my sample was reasonably representative of the wider student body in these respects.

Although the young people differed considerably in their levels of academic attainment, the subjects they studied during their time at college, the degrees they went on to study and the friendship groups to which they belonged, it is clear from Table 3 that many of them shared a similar (lower) middle class social location. It could be argued that this group of young

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<sup>4</sup> This was the case during the first year of the research. At the beginning of the second year of the study, the tutoring system was reorganised and students were allocated to new groups. (The rationale for the reorganisation was to strengthen the subject link between tutor and tutee and to form single-year tutor groups.) Although few groups of friends were assigned to the same tutor group, in most cases the reorganisation seemed to have had little impact on the young people's friendships.

<sup>5</sup> The average point score for those who sat two or more A Levels for the college as a whole was 16.0 (DfES, 2001b). This compares to a score of 21.9 points for students who took part in the research (and who sat two or more A Levels).



Table 3: Characteristics of the young people who took part in the research

Name of young person	GCSE results	A Level results: grades (and point score <sup>6</sup> ) (College average: 16.0)	Social class <sup>7</sup>	Highest educational qualification of mother	Highest educational qualification of father/step-father
Becky	3A*s, 6As	AAAB (38)	IIIN	O Levels	None
Charlotte	5A*s, 3As, 1B	AAB (28)	II	O Levels	Degree
Clare	5As, 5Bs	BCD (18)	IIIN	O Levels	BTEC
Jenny	3As, 4Bs, 3Cs	did not complete	II	O Levels	O Levels
Jim	3Bs, 5Cs, 1D	DDD (12)	II	O Levels	BTEC
Liz	3Bs, 5Cs, 1D	BCD (18)	V	O Levels	None
Lucy	1A*, 4As, 4Bs	ABC (24)	II	None	None
Mark	2As, 4Bs, 1C, 1D	ADN (14)	II	Certificate of Education	A Levels
Paul	2A*s, 3As, 5Bs	ABCE (26)	I	Certificate of Education	Degree
Rich	1A*, 2As, 3Bs, 2Cs	E (2)	I	Degree	Degree
Sarah	1A, 4Bs, 4Cs	CCD (16)	II	O Levels	O Levels
Simon	8As, 2Bs	BBD (20)	II	A Levels	A Levels
Steve	1A, 5Bs, 2Cs, 1D	CCD (16)	II	O Levels	O Levels
Sunita	2As, 6Bs, 2Cs	ACE (18)	II	None	O Levels
Zoë	5A*s, 3As, 1B	AABB (36)	IIIN	O Levels	O Levels

people is the least in need of research given its high level of representation within both 16-18 education (DfES, 2001d) and higher education (UCAS, 2000b). Nevertheless, the middle classes have historically been under-theorised within educational research (Power, 2001) and similarly neglected within the sociology of youth (Miles, 2000) – and this has been particularly true for the lower middle classes. While some recent research on young people's higher education choices has started to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of those from middle class families (Power, 1999; Reay *et al.*, 2001b; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), these

<sup>6</sup> This is based on the UCAS tariff, which was in use at the time the research was carried out. Ten points were awarded for an A grade, eight points for a B grade, six points for a C grade, four points for a D grade and two points for an E grade.

<sup>7</sup> This is based on parental occupation and uses the Registrar-General's classification of occupation. Where the class of the mother's and father's/step-father's occupation differed, the higher one was used.

studies have generally focussed on the upper or professional middle classes and/or young people with considerable family experience of higher education. Indeed, Reay *et al.* (2001b) chose to exclude those from the 'intermediate' middle class (IIN) from their comparison of the HE choices of young people from different class backgrounds. The research at Emily Davies College focuses more specifically on what Gershuny (1994) call the 'liminal' middle classes, and suggests that a sociological understanding of the decision-making process of the lower middle classes is also important in developing a more nuanced account of how young people think about their futures.

### *The students' choices*

Hey (1997) talks about the trade-offs that took place in her ethnographic research on girls' friendships: the girls provided access to their social lives in return for her attention, advice, money for sweets and absence from lessons (p.48). She goes on to suggest that this type of trading is endemic in field relations. In my study there were fewer obvious gains to the young people – apart from an opportunity to talk about themselves in considerable depth once a term. Although I did occasionally provide information about courses at Southampton University in response to their questions, very few students asked me for any such information and none ever asked me for any advice. Nevertheless, probing the reasons for the students' decisions to participate in the study remains important – to identify some of the characteristics of the young people and, thus, the extent to which generalizations are possible.

In the first tutor group I spoke to (Mr Oliver's group), almost all the students volunteered to take part in the study and the young men appeared as willing as their female counterparts. Ten students were recruited from this group: six young men and four young women. In the second tutor group, however (Mrs Long's), considerably fewer students indicated that they were willing to take part in the study and the five who did volunteer were all young women. Although I did not explore the reasons for this difference in any systematic way, my conversations with those who declined to take part and brief observations of the two tutor groups suggested a number of possible explanations. First, Mr Oliver encouraged his tutor group to take part, which seemed to generate some positive peer pressure. Mrs Long, however, left the room while I talked about my proposed study and thus exerted no positive influence on the students. Some of the differences amongst the young people in this group could be explained simply by the assumption that young women feel more comfortable than young men being interviewed by a female researcher and are thus more likely to volunteer

when no pressure is being applied from elsewhere. However, there were also differences between the young women in Mrs Long's tutor group, particularly amongst the members of one particular friendship group. Although two friends from this group volunteered to take part (Zoë and Charlotte), the other three members did not. They explained to me that they did not feel confident enough and 'always said the wrong thing' in interviews. Despite my assurances that the interviews would be friendly and informal, and that there were no 'wrong answers' – I was just interested to find out what they thought about universities – they stuck with their initial decision and exerted their 'power of refusal' (Vincent and Warren, 2001). Subsequent interviews with Zoë and Charlotte over the next two years indicated that their friends from this group were bright, had achieved extremely high grades at GCSE and were aiming for good A Level grades. However, it appears that the process of self-selection had the effect of excluding some less confident students, at least from this particular friendship group. I would argue, however, that this was not the case across the sample. Indeed, several students (Jenny, Liz, Sarah and Sunita) confided to me, in the context of discussing their university choices, that they were shy and not particularly self-confident. In this light, the decisions of Zoë and Charlotte's friends perhaps shed more light on the nature of friendships and perceived differences within their group (discussed in subsequent chapters) than on my sample as a whole.

A further explanation of the differences between tutor groups may be subject-related. At the time when I began the research, students were assigned to tutor groups on the basis of secondary school attended and broad subject grouping. Thus, most of the students in Mr Oliver's tutor group were studying at least one arts or humanities subject, while there were many more scientists and mathematicians in Mrs Long's group. It could be argued that arts and humanities students are more likely than science students to have an awareness of the nature of social research and, as a result, are more likely to see the value of it and/or to be more confident about taking part in such a project. Equally, they may have had more practice at expressing themselves orally, and feel more comfortable at the prospect of a series of interviews than their counterparts studying science.

Finally, perceived level of academic attainment may also have had some bearing on the students' decisions. As can be seen from the students' GCSE results and A Level grades (Table 3), many of those who took part in the study had a higher level of attainment than the college average. Although I had intentionally chosen tutor groups with relatively high

average GCSE scores (on the basis that I anticipated most of the young people would be considering HE), it is probably the case that students who felt very confident of their own ability and the prospect of applying to HE were more likely to volunteer to take part in research exploring these issues than their less confident peers. Nevertheless, despite the relatively high average level of attainment within the sample, there were significant differences: some students who achieved relatively low average GCSE scores volunteered to take part – from both Mr Oliver's and Mrs Long's tutor groups.

Although these possible explanations as to why some students volunteered to take part in the research and others did not are necessarily speculative, the differences between the participants and their friends and peers are important in so far as they help indicate to which sites the findings of this study may be transferable. This is pursued further below.

### **3.3.3 Generalizing to other contexts**

There is considerable debate about the extent to which generalization is possible in qualitative research, when samples are rarely selected on grounds of their statistical representativeness. Indeed, some researchers have claimed that the desire to generalize to populations from a case study or other form of qualitative research sample is, in itself, misguided (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). They argue that researchers should, instead, aim to describe a group in fine detail rather than discover general laws of human behaviour. Thus, the goal is not to produce a standard set of results that others could have produced: 'rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation' (Schofield, 1993, p.202). Other researchers have, however, argued that it is possible to generalize on the basis of qualitative research, albeit in a different way from that typical of quantitative studies employing statistically representative samples of specific populations. Yin (1994), for example, maintains that qualitative studies can pose relevant questions about other settings – although he suggests that generalizing any further will be dependent on similarity or difference to the first setting. Instead of statistical generalization, he advocates 'analytic generalization' in which a previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study: 'if two or more cases are shown to support the same theory, replication may be claimed' (p.31). Similarly, Hammersley (1992) suggests that steps can be taken to improve the generalizability of case studies through, for example, the

use of published statistics of the aggregate population to which generalization is being made and a comparison with other case studies to determine typicality:

I am not suggesting that these various strategies are always able to give us a very sound basis for generalization, but they can provide some evidence, and we should not scorn that evidence simply because it is not statistical. By means of these strategies we can moderate the relative weakness of case study in providing for the generalizability of findings to a large, finite population of cases. (p.191)

In addition to statistical comparisons between the characteristics of populations, Schofield (1993) argues that we need a 'thick description' of the site of study and site to which we want to generalize, to facilitate the search for similarities and differences.

The main focus of my project has been to explore the higher education decisions of young people and the impact these have had on their friendships. As part of this, I have been concerned to relate the research to the wider literature through the iterative process described above, and to select students on the basis of their theoretical significance rather than their representativeness. Given this emphasis, comparability with other studies has not been a primary concern and, indeed, would have proved difficult given the relatively small number of previous studies in this area. I would also argue that, in many qualitative studies, it is extremely difficult to choose a 'typical' unit for analysis, on the basis that this will make comparability with other cases more likely. No two social situations are the same in all respects and so, to determine typicality, a researcher needs to be able to define the key causal variables that are likely to be important in the study. However, unless the researcher is pursuing a deductive investigation, it is often difficult to isolate such causal variables at the beginning of the research, thus rendering typicality merely a matter of judgement. Nevertheless, I do acknowledge the importance of a detailed description of the college at which I am conducting my research and of my respondents (see Appendices 1-3). By providing such a description, I can allow other researchers to determine to what extent transferability to other sites is possible.

Section 3.3.2 discussed some of the attributes of the individuals who volunteered to take part in the research and suggested that, for some, their willingness to participate may have been related to their high attainment levels and/or self-confidence. The institutional characteristics

of Emily Davies College (see Appendix 1) may also give some indication of the type of sites to which generalization may be possible. For example, in colleges or schools which do not have as high a level of average attainment as Emily Davies College, or which have a smaller proportion of each year group going on to university, HE choices may be discussed differently by friends (indeed, Reay *et al.* (2001a) highlight differences between the way students at a further education college discussed their HE choices with their peers when compared with students at other types of institution). Similarly, the social class and ethnic composition of individual schools and colleges, and the type of HE-related activities on offer, may have an influence on what is discussed. For example, young people with a considerable amount of advice from their parents may have less need of advice from their friends than others or, conversely, they may feel more confident in talking about HE and thus discuss it more and/or in greater depth with their friends. Equally, it is possible that in some institutions peer-led discussion may be incorporated as an explicit part of the HE programme and have some influence on both the nature and impact of HE-related talk between friends. (The role of parents, teachers and the college generally is discussed in more detail in Chapters Four and Five.)

The substantial differences between different forms of post-16 provision may also limit the generalizability of findings from this study. Several studies (Pugsley, 1998; Reay, 1998a; Roberts and Allen, 1997) have demonstrated an association between young people's level of knowledge about HE and the type of post-16 institution they attended. Roberts and Allen, for example, found that students in FE colleges were less well informed than those in schools and sixth form colleges. They argue that this was partially a result of the different backgrounds of students at these different types of institution, but also of the differences in institutional organisation and the post-18 destinations of their students. My own research does not attempt to define the relative weight of these factors; instead, it is concerned to explore the nature of friends' and peers' influence. Nevertheless, these factors may have a strong bearing on the extent to which friends discuss HE and the content of conversations, and the findings of this study must be viewed in this light.

### **3.4 Researching friendships**

Two inherent problems of researching friendships are defining the term 'friend' (Bell and Coleman, 1999) and understanding what respondents mean by their own use of this term.

Indeed, in both academic literature and everyday discourse there are few firmly agreed criteria for what constitutes a friend, with significant variations in both the understanding and practice of friendship between cultural groups (Krappman, 1996). Further, those criteria that are employed are highly contextual: someone who is labelled a friend in one situation may not be perceived as one in another setting (Allen, 1981). Allan (1996) argues that the contextual specificity of friendship is particularly evident in research studies of the phenomenon, with respondents often assuming a 'tighter' definition of friendship than when friendship is not the main topic of conversation: 'thus, people who may be referred to in passing as a friend in other situations may not be categorised as such in a research setting' (p.90).

Given my interests in the influence of young people's peers and distant friends, as well as their close friends, I used a number of different strategies to try to avoid this 'tight' definition of friendship. First, I found it more useful to ask questions about specific, named friends (who had been mentioned in previous interviews) than about 'friends'. The latter led to rather bland, generalized comments, while referring to named friends allowed respondents to make more specific responses, often accompanied by concrete examples of conversations they had had or activities they had pursued. It also led more naturally to comparisons between different groups of friends or individuals, avoiding some of the normative assumptions associated with the label 'friends'. Second, I directed many of the interview questions at specific activities or events rather than the role of friends *per se*. For example, if respondents mentioned friends or peers as part of a response to the question 'Who did you talk about the college's HE fair with?', I would then go on to discuss the nature of the relationship and explore the friendship in this way. Finally, in each interview I took specific steps to probe whether respondents considered themselves to be friends with people in other contexts, asking, for example about friends in subject groups, outside college, and in clubs and societies. Indeed, throughout the research, I was careful to place young people's relationships with their friends and peers within the context of their wider social networks – networks which included relationships with parents, siblings, other relatives, neighbours and acquaintances in other settings (for example, Steve talked a lot about HE to someone who played in the same band as him but someone he did not categorise as a 'friend'). As Allan (1996) emphasises, a network approach allows the researcher to explore the interplay of a number of different relationships. Thus, both data collection and analysis investigated the

part parents, siblings and others had played in the decision-making process and the extent to which this had impacted upon the nature and extent of friend and peer influences.

### **3.5 Inconsistencies and contradictions**

A common theme in many research methods text is the way in which the researcher should approach inconsistencies and contradictions within his or her data. For Cohen and Manion (1994), for example, inconsistencies between sources of data, or between the findings of different methods, are problematic. They thus advocate triangulation as a way of ensuring that findings are not merely the artefact of one particular method (or of one particular period of time, source of data or geographical location). However, this view is not universally shared. Indeed, many other researchers (Bryman, 1988; Devine and Heath, 1999; Mason, 1996; Skeggs, 1994; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) dispute the idea that such inconsistencies are necessarily problematic and suggest that they can, instead, be used very productively, to explore ‘the dynamics of complex social phenomena, highlighting the multi-layered and often contradictory nature of social life’ (Devine and Heath, 1999, p.49).

Although these debates are often related specifically to the use of multiple methods in social research (Bryman, 1988; Mason, 1994; Yin, 1994), they seem equally relevant to a discussion of contradictions highlighted by a single method (the in-depth interview). For example, over the two-year study at Emily Davies College, inconsistencies and contradictions emerged on a variety of levels: within individual interviews, across a series of interviews with one young person, and between the accounts of different members of a friendship group. There also seemed to be significant differences between the young people in the extent to which they were themselves aware of such inconsistencies, and the importance they attributed to maintaining a coherent narrative of self. This section describes some of the ways in which inconsistencies arose and considers the implications they may have for the analysis and interpretation of data.

#### **3.5.1 Different accounts**

At several points in the research clear contradictions emerged within a single interview and, in most of these cases, the young people involved seemed oblivious to such inconsistencies. For example, in the final round of interviews, Liz provided the following explanation of why



she had decided to put Portsmouth as her first choice on her UCAS form, rather than Middlesex (which she had seemed very keen on when interviewed the previous term):

- Liz: Middlesex was my first choice but I changed it to Portsmouth.
- Rachel: Why was that?
- Liz: Because it's close enough to home if I need help, but far enough away for a bit of independence. Whereas Middlesex – I didn't like the surrounding area, around the university. The university itself wasn't that good quality and it was just too far north cos it's like north, north London. (Interview 6)

However, about 25 minutes later on in the interview, in response to questions about her friendships and relationships, she described her decision in a very different way:

- Rachel: Last time you mentioned that your girlfriend didn't want you to move away. Did that affect your decision at all?
- Liz: Yeah, it did. But then she turned round and slept with my best friend, so I was like, 'I could have gone to Middlesex after all!'
- Rachel: So that was the main thing that swayed you about Portsmouth, her saying she didn't want you to move away?
- Liz: Yeah. (Interview 6)

Differences were also apparent across interviews; the same decision was explained in different ways at different points in time. Sarah, for example, had maintained throughout most of the two-year period that her boyfriend had had little influence on her HE choices. However, in the final interview, when explaining why she had decided against studying education at university (she had applied for one course in English and education and five other courses in English literature and/or creative writing), she claimed that the only reason that she had become interested in teaching as a career was because her boyfriend had strongly encouraged her. She felt she would not be suited for a job as a teacher – and was no longer under any pressure from her boyfriend as they had split up. She reflected that: 'Looking back, it was pretty much him, you know, saying, "You should go into teaching" sort of thing' (Interview 6). Thus, changes in Sarah's circumstances seemed to have changed the way in which she interpreted some of her decisions.

It is possible that differences across interviews may also be related to changes in students' self-identity over the two-year period. There is a large literature on the way in which identities are constructed, their close relationship with culture, and their often fluid nature (see, for example, Castells, 1997 and Hall, 1997). Moreover, some writers (Beck, 1992; du Bois Reymond, 1998; Giddens, 1991) have suggested that in contemporary society the nature of identity has undergone a significant shift, such that self-identity has become 'a reflexively ordered endeavour' (Giddens, 1991, p.5) and that constant revisions of our biographical narratives become a central component of the 'reflexive project of the self' (ibid.). Although it is arguable whether such revisions of identity are equally available to all, irrespective of social and economic status (Reay, 1998d; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), changes in the self-identity of some of the young people at Emily Davies College were evident over the two-year period. Liz gave the clearest account of how she had 'reinvented' herself between school and college:

I kind of like changed my image....literally...I finished my exams [GCSEs] and then.... because I wasn't allowed to express myself at school. I got more into the music cos the music's like a major part of our group. I kind of got into that in Year 11 but then I got more into it during the break before college....It's a bit weird at the moment because I'm on this cross-over type thing. (Interview 1)

However, there was also evidence that the self-identity of other students had changed, in more subtle ways, over the course of the research project, largely as a result of changes in their perception of their position relative to others. Again, these changes, differences and inconsistencies were explored in both data collection and analysis. They constitute a central theme of the research and are discussed more fully in Chapters Four and Five.

Differences also emerged between the accounts of members of the same friendship group when talking about the same activity, conversation or HE choice – and were apparent amongst all the groups of friends who took part in the project (Charlotte and Zoë; Jenny and Sunita; Mark, Rich and Steve; and Lucy and Simon). Charlotte and Zoë not only described particular HE-related events and decisions in very different ways (see the discussion of their attendance at the meeting for students interested in applying to Oxbridge in Chapter Six), but they also seemed to hold quite divergent understandings of their own friendship. For example, during the fifth round of interviews (in the spring term of the young people's

second year at college), Charlotte thought there had been little change within her friendship group: 'We haven't really moved away at all', while Zoë claimed that there *had* been significant movement within the group:

I might see them [Charlotte and Sinead] in passing in college or something but not for great periods of time.....I think we probably haven't got so many common interests any more.....They've changed definitely cos Sinead [....] was so clever, she had so much potential but she didn't follow it through and put in the work in college.

(Interview 5)

Such differences between members of a friendship group are perhaps inevitable given the different ways in which people interpret social situations, and are discussed in other qualitative studies (see, for example, Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) account of the discrepancies between the actual academic attainment of Heather, one of the young women in their study, and the ways in which her performance was understood by her family). Exploring the reasons for these different interpretations furthered my understanding of both the dynamics of some of the friendship groups and the way in which some young people were attempting to 'manage' their relationships (see, for example, the discussion of the different accounts given by Zoë and Charlotte in Chapter Six). Equally inevitable seem to be differences in a young person's accounts over time, as their understanding of an event changed, their perspective altered or they tried to make sense of the past in light of present experiences. Again, these do not seem to be inherently problematic but, rather, provide revealing insights into the way in which the young people's thoughts about their decision-making processes changed over time (see also Skeggs, 1994). Indeed, as Devine and Heath (1999) have suggested, in such cases it is not necessary, or helpful, to determine which is the 'true' account, but to explore the reasons for such discrepancies. Moreover, inconsistencies and contradictions within a single interview also proved to be revealing. They indicated not only the ability of some young people to maintain several different interpretations of an event simultaneously, but also the extent to which they were concerned to present a coherent and consistent picture of themselves during the interviews.

### **3.5.2 The importance of a consistent narrative of self**

Although many of the young people seemed unaware of (or, at least, unconcerned about) the types of inconsistencies and contradictions in their accounts discussed above, this was not

true across the whole sample. Paul, for example, talked about this quite explicitly in the final interview, when I asked him to reflect on his involvement in the project. He described his desire to ‘come across well’ in the interview and thought that he had probably presented himself as more definite about his career ambitions than he actually was. To illustrate this, he explained that he was not particularly keen on becoming a legal adviser in the air force and had emphasised this in most of the interviews only because he thought it was important to have a specific ‘career aim’. Furthermore, Paul spoke about his desire to present a coherent and consistent picture of himself. He claimed that he had been uneasy when I had brought up things he had mentioned in previous interviews that had subsequently changed (such as his view of a particular university and likely UCAS choices) and felt that such inconsistencies reflected poorly on him. Although no other young person seemed to share Paul’s degree of concern at such changes and perceived lack of consistency, Charlotte was nevertheless aware of the possibility of inconsistencies between her accounts of her friends and friendship group, and those given by her friend, Zoë. She reflected, ‘It would be strange if I said something about Zoë and she said the opposite – I did think that’ (Interview 6).

Again, I would suggest that such inconsistencies are not necessarily problematic. Nevertheless, the significant contrasts between those young people who seemed oblivious to inconsistencies and contradictions (such as Liz and Sarah, discussed above) and others (such as Paul) who were more aware of contradictions and more concerned to present a coherent narrative of themselves, had implications for the way in which I analysed the data and compared the young people’s accounts. For example, the importance that Paul attributed to presenting a consistent narrative helped to explain some of the unease he had shown when he talked about changes to his HE plans over the course of the two years while, more generally, the contrasts between the young people in the sample helped illuminate some of the more subtle differences between them in terms of how they thought about themselves, how they chose to present themselves to others, and the way in which they responded to the interview situation.

### **3.6 Ethical issues**

A common topic of discussion within the educational research literature is the nature of ‘informed consent’ when dealing with children and young people and, in particular, the inappropriateness of some methods of gaining consent which may be used relatively

unproblematically with adults (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Holmes, 1998). It can also be argued that young people have less experience and awareness of social research than adults: they are less likely to have been asked to take part in other research studies and perhaps have had less exposure to the results of social research through the media. Although these are legitimate concerns, I believe that the majority of my respondents had some awareness of the nature of research studies (for example, some compared what I was doing to studies they had read about in their sociology lessons). As far as I know, none had participated in a previous study but, given the diversity of research methods, it is arguable whether participation in a telephone interview by a market research company, for example, would prepare either adults or young people for taking part in a longitudinal study, involving in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, they were generally intelligent, able to follow my explanation of the aims and methods of the study and had the opportunity of refusing to take part in the project (which several of their peers took up). This would suggest that in my study, the ethical issues surrounding their participation are similar to those of studies involving adults rather than those with children.

A further concern, common to studies with adults as well as young people and children, is the extent to which informed consent is actually possible. For example, both Vincent and Warren (2001) and David *et al.* (2001b) describe ways in which the 'power of refusal' was unequally distributed amongst their respondents. They suggest that in their research some negotiations were merely perfunctory, given that the respondents' tutors and/or teachers had already consented to the research. Similarly, at Emily Davies College it is possible that the young people felt some pressure to consent because of the way in which my research had been endorsed by the college and, in one of the two tutor groups, by the way it was presented very positively by the form tutor. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, many of the young people in the two classes did decline to take part in the interviews (although most completed the questionnaire which I distributed), suggesting that the students did retain some degree of power of refusal.

A number of studies have also questioned the extent to which it is possible to fully inform a potential respondent about the nature of the research project in which he or she is being asked to take part (David *et al.*, 2001b; Rees, 1991). For example, it would be impossible to explain the rationale for each interview question to respondents. Furthermore, at the beginning of the research I was not aware of some of the issues that I would be keen to

explore in later interviews, nor how I would present and disseminate my findings. While I certainly took steps to ensure that students understood my research aims and methods at the beginning of the project (through presentations to tutor groups, written information and one-to-one discussions) and how I intended to write up the research (when I had made a decision, myself, at a later stage of the research), I would argue that to provide students with a complete understanding of my evolving thinking would have been neither possible nor desirable.

First, given the changing nature of my data collection and analysis and the often complex reasons for asking particular questions during interviews, it is unlikely that students would have been prepared to devote the time that would have been necessary to explain my thinking to them. More important, however, was my belief that involving respondents any further in the research would be problematic. I rejected what Scott and Usher (1999) characterise as ‘open democratic research’: that which emphasises the rights of participants to control which data are collected and which are included in the research report. In this model of social research the researcher deliberately writes him/herself out of the research and presents as full a picture as possible on the basis of the participants’ views of reality. This phenomenological perspective assumes that respondents have full knowledge of the perspectives that underpin their everyday actions. I would argue, however, that respondents generally do not have a full knowledge of the settings that structure their actions, nor are they aware of the similarities and differences between their account and the accounts of others. For these reasons I would locate myself within the ‘open autocratic’ model of research (Scott and Usher, 1999), rejecting the case for allowing respondents right of veto and therefore obligating me to protect the interests of those who have agreed to take part in the research. Given this position, maintaining the confidentiality of the students’ responses assumed great importance. As I was interviewing a number of students from the same friendship group, I was careful throughout the interviews not to bring up specific information that their friends had divulged that would have breached confidentiality. More problematic, however, were my initial plans to conduct a number of focus groups with the respondents and their closest friends. I decided not to proceed with these due to the sensitive nature of many of the issues surrounding HE choice and students’ decisions to conceal certain aspects of their choices from their friends.

### 3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a number of methodological issues that were of particular importance in this study. It argues that two aspects of the research design (the longitudinal nature of the project and the way in which the sample was recruited) are likely to have had a significant impact on the findings of the study, including the extent to which the ideas discussed in subsequent chapters are generalizable to other contexts. It also explored a number of issues connected with researching friendships and with analysing inconsistencies and contradictions in students' accounts. It has suggested that, far from invalidating the findings of this research, inconsistencies between accounts (within a single interview, across a series of interviews or between friends) are an inevitable part of social life and help to contextualise the young people's narratives. Finally, this chapter has discussed some ethical considerations that the project brought into sharp relief, and located the study within an 'open autocratic' model of research.

The next three chapters discuss substantive findings from this two-year longitudinal study and relate them to the themes within the literature on both higher education choice and friendship, which were outlined in Chapters One and Two. First, Chapter Four explores the extent to which the young people discussed their HE decisions with their friends and peers. On the basis of compelling evidence from almost all the students involved in the research, it argues that HE choices were very rarely discussed at any length with close friends. It then goes on to consider the reasons why the young people decided not to confide in their friends and peers and suggests that, for many respondents, HE-related conversations with friends were extremely difficult because of the social and academic differences that such discussions highlighted.

## CHAPTER FOUR. DIFFERENCES AND DIFFICULTIES

### 4.1 Introduction

In their quantitative study of HE choice, Roberts and Allen (1997) found that a young person's peer group was the most common source of influence on the decisions he or she made after that of his or her family. Over 70 per cent of their sample had discussed their choice of both course and institution with their friends. Similar findings emerged from Connor *et al.*'s (1999) research, with 90 per cent of their respondents having consulted friends about their higher education choices. Although it is clearly not the case that discussing HE decisions with friends is synonymous with being influenced by them, Allen's (1998) work – also a quantitative survey – suggests that friends do play a significant role: over 40 per cent of the young people involved in her research assessed the influence of their friends as either 'important' or 'very important'.

Using qualitative data drawn from the interviews with the Emily Davies students, this chapter will illuminate the nature of such conversations with friends and others in the wider peer group. It will show that, contrary to the implications of Roberts and Allen's and Connor *et al.*'s research, conversations about higher education courses and institutions were extremely limited within this sample of young people. In seeking to explain the reasons for this it will highlight a number of difficulties young people had in talking to their friends about higher education, focussing largely on the significant emerging differences between friends and others in the wider peer group. It will also suggest that the advice and support provided by the young people's families (and, to a lesser extent, by their teachers) obviated the need for them to seek specific information from their friends. Furthermore, differing familial assumptions about HE may have exacerbated the difficulty of engaging in conversations with friends. Finally, the anxiety about the transition to higher education, experienced by some of the young people, will also be discussed. Drawing these various strands together, the chapter will argue that discussions about HE were inherently problematic for almost all the young people in the sample – and for this reason were avoided.



## 4.2 The absence of discussion

### 4.2.1 Evidence from the study

Throughout the two years of the longitudinal study, almost all the young people claimed that the subject of higher education – in terms of both course and institution – was not one they had discussed in any great detail with many or, in some cases, any, of their close friends. In many ways this was surprising, given what quantitative studies of HE choice have indicated about the importance of friends and peers in the decision-making process (Allen, 1998; Connor *et al.*, 1999; Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Roberts and Allen, 1997) and also what many of the young people had told me about the nature of their friendships. Indeed, the contrast between the young people's descriptions of the closeness of their friendships (see Appendix 3) and their reluctance to talk about HE was marked:

- Steve: I haven't talked much about it with him [Mark] at all really. I don't know what he's thinking of doing or where he's going. It's never come up in conversation.
- Rachel: Is he still someone you'd call a close friend?
- Steve: Oh he's a close friend; it's just something that never comes up really.  
(Interview 3)

Several students remarked on this contrast themselves. For example, Becky and Mark commented:

- Becky: It sounds weird, that I'm not talking to my closest friends about things that are probably going to affect the rest of my life but it's just that I feel a bit uncomfortable talking to them about, you know, 'Oh I'm going to Oxford and do this and what are you going to do?' 'Oh, I don't know'. (Interview 4)
- Mark: I thought a lot of people, like my friends, would talk about it while they were doing their UCAS forms, but no one really said anything. I don't know [why] really. (Interview 4)

Furthermore, when higher education had been talked about with close friends, it was in almost all cases only *after* decisions had been taken and was usually prompted by specific events such as handing in UCAS forms or receiving offers. Paul claimed that: 'I didn't find out where people had applied 'til after I had applied' (Interview 4), while the following comments were typical of the young people's reflections on the timing and nature of university-related talk:

Rachel: Why do you think you haven't talked about it much with that group of friends?

Jim: ...I think it's cos UCAS is out of the way now. All the forms have been sent off and we're not really...we just don't talk about it.  
(Interview 4)

Sunita: I've told them [friends] that I'm doing these things and that's it really. I didn't mention some other ones like Bath when I was trying to decide and I was thinking of Sheffield but never mentioned it. (Interview 4)

Lucy: Someone will say 'Oh, I got an offer through' and we'll say 'Oh, where?' and that will be it. (Interview 4).

Rachel: Is that something you've talked about quite a bit?

Zoë: A bit when it was like the UCAS time but not so much now cos I've kind of put it behind me, like applying and everything. So I don't really mention it that much. I don't really think we mentioned it that much before either...just a quick 'Oh what do you want to do? Where are you applying?' sort of thing. (Interview 4)

Even in the autumn term of the young people's second year at college, when many tutor periods were devoted to higher education applications and most young people were giving serious thought to courses and institutions they would put on their UCAS forms, the amount of time spent discussing choices was extremely limited. The same pattern was repeated in the following term, when most of the students received offers or rejections from the higher education institutions to which they had applied and were required to decide on their firm and insurance offers. The pattern was also common across the whole of the sample of young

people from Emily Davies college: none of the gender differences in conversations about HE noted by Reay (1998a) (such as young women discussing their choices with friends more frequently than young men) were replicated in this study.

#### **4.2.2 The rhetoric of individual choice**

During the interviews, when I asked the young people to reflect on the reasons why they had not talked much about higher education with their close friends, some were unable to provide any clear explanation and, instead, seemed surprised that it had not been a more common topic of conversation. Others, however, emphasised what they perceived to be the ‘individual’ nature of decision-making about HE and the importance of this. In response to specific questions about the influence of friends and family on higher education decisions, many of the young people talked primarily in terms of individual choice, claiming that others had had very little involvement in their decision-making processes. Sunita’s and Paul’s comments were typical:

Sunita: I didn’t want them to like influence me, [to] tell me where to go or something. I wanted to make that decision for myself. I know you can listen to people and at the end of the day make your own decision but I didn’t want somebody to say ‘Oh, that’s a rubbish university’ or something, or ‘I’ve been up there, it’s not nice’ and put me off.  
(Interview 4)

Paul: I don’t think I’ll be swayed by where any of my friends go. I don’t want to go to university just because my friends have gone there cos I’m not doing their degree. I’m doing my own degree. (Interview 3)

This strongly reflects Reay *et al.*’s (2001a) findings in all but one of the schools and colleges in which they conducted research: in only the FE college did students see the HE decision-making process as a collective endeavour.

However, the interview data indicate that although the rhetoric of the importance of ‘individual choice’ was frequently drawn upon by the students to justify particular decisions with respect to friends, decisions not to discuss HE choices were linked strongly to the nature of relationships with friends rather than merely a positive desire to make an ‘individual

choice.’ Furthermore, while familial influence was also not readily acknowledged in answer to direct questions, many students outlined significant ways in which their parents and siblings had influenced their choice of HE course and institution, both directly and indirectly, thus further emphasising the socially-embedded nature of their decisions.

From this perspective, the young people’s recourse to individualistic explanations of their own actions can be seen as a reflection of the assumptions that inform much educational policy (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001), as well as the language frequently employed in public discourse by politicians and educationalists (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) and, in the context of the college, by teachers and careers advisers. In many ways this supports Furlong and Cartmel’s (1997) assertion that throughout the education system young people are increasingly expected to negotiate the pathways they take as individuals rather than members of a collectivity. They go on to suggest that this is a result of: the construction of education as a consumer product; the variety of routes and qualifications available to young people; and changing political ideologies (away from the understanding of education as a means to increase equality of opportunity and towards the introduction of free market principles). Indeed, evidence from the UK and abroad suggests that young people frequently downplay the significance of structural factors in their lives and, as a consequence, individualize their own successes and failures (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2002)

I will argue in this chapter that it is possible to understand the apparent reluctance of the young people to engage in conversations about higher education without assuming that it is the result of a positive desire to make an ‘individual choice’. In doing so, I will draw on some of the reasons put forward by the young people themselves but also on other evidence, provided less directly by the students, when they were talking about their friendships and the wider peer group within the college. In particular, I will suggest that at least part of the explanation is related to the way in which the process of higher education choice emphasises differences between friends.

Over the six rounds of interviews differences between friends and peers in several areas were highlighted – often by the young people themselves. These included differences in: academic attainment, values, subject areas and the timing of HE decisions. While differences do not necessarily lead to difficulties in talking about HE choices, some of the differences did seem particularly problematic for the young people concerned because of the ways in which they

threatened the perceived equality of their friendships. This was exacerbated in some cases by the hierarchical judgements made by the young people about some of these types of difference. Although few of the differences discussed in the following section were *created* by the process of HE choice, or by the young people's experiences at sixth form college, they do seem to have placed new tensions upon existing friendships. Indeed, the process of HE choice seems to have played an important role in making explicit previously latent differences. It was these emerging differences that made talking about HE with close friends difficult for many of the young people in this study.

### **4.3 Hierarchical differences**

As discussed in Chapter One, the sociological and psychological literature emphasises the importance of openness and disclosure to the practice of friendship. It also highlights the centrality of the perception of equality between those who consider themselves to be friends. For example, Allan (1996) claims that:

Friendship, in whatever form it takes, is defined as a relationship between equals. That is, within friendship there is little sense of social hierarchy or status difference. Instead the emphasis is placed firmly on similarity and equivalence. Whatever the social differences outside the tie, at the core of friendship is the notion that friends regard and treat one another as equals within it. (p.89)

This section will demonstrate how various aspects of the process of HE choice posed a direct threat to this equality by creating or foregrounding differences between the young people.

#### **4.3.1 Differences in academic attainment**

One of the most significant differences between friends and peers was that in academic attainment. Although several of the young people claimed that they had been aware of differences in academic attainment within their friendship group before arriving at Emily Davies College, it was only when embarking upon the process of HE choice that these differences gained such significance. Predicted grades determined, to a large extent, what courses and institutions could be considered by individual students and, thus, were seen by the young people as having serious implications for future careers. Becky articulated this well:

I mean we have always been different in that I've sort of been, you know, higher up in classes and grades and everything, but it's never really mattered. She has felt as though she had to try and live up to the same standards because she was my best friend and everything but, you know, it got to a certain point when she realised [there was no point] bothering. But now it's back to that point only it's much worse cos it's such a difference: her being here in college for a third year and me going to Oxford. (Interview 5)

These differences, highlighted by HE choice, were exacerbated in some friendship groups by the relatively recent emergence of academic differences. For example, Zoë and Charlotte's friendship group seemed to be predicated upon common levels of high attainment. Both young women emphasised this in the early interviews when I asked them what were the best things about being part of their particular friendship group:

Zoë: ...we're all sort of – this will sound quite big-headed – clever people so we're all on a par with one another. Nobody feels inferior in that way. You might be friends with someone who didn't do very well in their exams and they might not feel happy with you and you might not feel happy with them. (Interview 1)

Charlotte: They are all really clever so it's competitive and you're pushed forward all the time. If you get a bad grade they are not going to judge you. They are very understanding and have bad days as well. (Interview 1)

However, by the end of their first year at Emily Davies College differences were apparent:

Rachel: Would you say they are predicted the same sort of grades as you?

Charlotte: Yes. They are all predicted As and Bs. Although the more we've been here, the more our grades have separated out. Like Zoë's the one with all the As, As, As and there are a few people who get lower grades and I am somewhere in the middle...it's strange because normally we all used to get exactly the same results and now it's a lot more varied. (Interview 3)

The difficulty of talking about HE options with friends of a different attainment level was emphasised by almost all the young people at different points throughout the study. They were concerned not to 'brag' about their own attainment and likely HE prospects if they had achieved grades higher than their friends. Equally, those with lower grades were also reluctant to talk about HE with their friends because it emphasised these differences:

Jim:                Like with people in my classes, like in my physics class, I don't like to talk to people cos I don't want them to judge me, like say, 'Why [are] you doing physics?' I don't want them to think I'm not good enough or something. So I'd rather not. I don't like talking to them about it.  
(Interview 4)

#### **4.3.2 Differences in choice of institutions**

Not only were the young people aware of the differences in academic attainment between themselves and their friends, but many anticipated that this would lead to them attending different types of university. The ways in which universities and colleges were ranked differed both between friendship groups and between individuals (this is discussed further in Chapter Five). Nonetheless, almost all employed some kind of ranking system to differentiate between institutions and most made some link between academic ability and type of HEI. Steve was explicit about how he perceived this relationship. In the second round of interviews, he claimed that within his friendship group there were three 'bands' of ability: those who got As and who were 'pretty much up there'; a 'mid-range band', who typically achieved Bs and Cs at college (and in which he located himself); and a third band, for whom a C grade was a considerable achievement. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, he then mapped these bands on to three equivalent groups of university, with the expectation that the differences in the attainment of his friends would be reflected in the differences in the status of the HEIs they attended. Once these hierarchies had been constructed, it seemed that they served to suppress discussion of certain HE choices within some friendship groups. Indeed, Steve went on to claim that:

On some aspects people are bothered, yet on another plane people don't really want to talk about it because they don't want to be seen as probably inferior. I myself wouldn't look on anyone less if they said they wanted to go to Southampton Institute

or somewhere which, let's face it, isn't up there really, but I think quite a few of us are quite self-conscious in what everyone else thinks of us. (Interview 2)

#### **4.3.3 Differences in choice of subjects**

While the majority of hierarchies were constructed around perceived academic ability and/or institutional status, for some young people the status attached to particular subjects was also important. Zoë and Charlotte's friendship group seemed to be highly sensitive to the status of degree subjects, but much less aware of the reputation of higher education institutions. In part this can be explained by the subject focus of the group: almost all members had, on entry to Emily Davies College, been keen to study medicine – and had generally changed their minds only when they felt that their grades would not be high enough to gain entry to this particular course. This appeared to have made discussions about universities problematic.

Zoë: I decided I wanted to be a doctor in Year 8 and have stuck with it all the way through. And then in Year 9 Sinead was like, 'Oh, I want to do medicine' and then we all got our results and she got amazing GCSE grades – all the teachers were like, 'Now Sinead can be a doctor!' And then Charlotte wanted to be a doctor and so we all wanted to do medicine. I'm the only person who has actually stuck with it. (Interview 3)

Rachel: Have you talked to her [Zoë] about courses at other universities?

Charlotte: No. It hasn't really come up cos we want to do...well, not different things, cos Zoë wants to be a doctor, but we have different ideas about what we want cos I'm not really sure about being a doctor and she definitely is, so we don't really compare them. (Interview 3)

Within other friendship groups, there was also a small number of subjects to which a particular status was attached. These included media studies within Paul's group and classical civilisation within Mark and Steve's group. Both subjects were seen as of low status within the respective groups and individuals who expressed an interest in studying them were often teased.



#### 4.3.4 The significance of difference

The identification of differences does not, of course, necessarily entail difficulties. However, the differences between the young people in the areas discussed above were imbued with greater significance because of the hierarchical nature of the judgements that the young people attached to them. Differences in academic attainment, higher education institution and, for some, proposed course of study at HE and future career, were not seen as value-neutral. In almost all friendship groups, differences in these areas were explicitly or implicitly ranked.

I will argue in Chapter Five that through the construction of hierarchies, friends and peers exerted an important influence on young people's decisions. However, it is also the case that such influences served, simultaneously, to restrict conversations about higher education. As the young people engaged in the decision-making process with regards to HE, they became more aware of the differences between themselves and their friends, and it became more difficult for them to discuss HE without undermining the perceived equality of their friendships. In relation to issues such as attainment, likely place of study and, for some young people, course and career, it was not simply a matter of making different choices. These differences were positioned hierarchically, thus putting substantial pressure on the perceived equality of many friendships.

Even when young people were not sure of their own positioning, they were acutely aware of the consequences of making claims about it. For example, several students were concerned to ensure that they were not perceived by their friends and peers as over-confident, aspiring to too high a position on the hierarchy. Both Paul and Sunita revealed that there were some aspects of their choices that they were reluctant to share with friends because of the possibility that they might fail to achieve their goals. Such concerns highlight the importance the young people placed on their friends' opinions of them. While Paul had told his friends about his decision to apply to Southampton, he was much more reticent about Oxford:

...to a certain extent I don't want to tell everyone that I went to Oxford on Tuesday to the open day cos then [they will] think, 'Oh, you're going to apply to Oxford.'....They just assume that just because you go on the open day you'll apply there or you'll want to go to it.....I don't want to build myself up for a huge fall.  
(Interview 3)

Similarly, when asked why she had not talked about her choices much with her friends, Sunita stated that:

Because I feel stupid when I say something and do something else...you say all these things but at the end of the day you're not really sure what you'll do and you don't want to say something, 'I really want to do this' and you get really rubbish grades and end up doing something else. I don't want to end up looking stupid! (Interview 3)

The hierarchical nature of educational markets has been highlighted within the literature on secondary school choice (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Lauder and Hughes, 1999) as well as within studies of HE (Ainley, 1994; Ball *et al.*, 2002; Brown and Scase, 1994; Reay *et al.*, 2001b). This may suggest that by the time they embark upon the HE decision-making process young people already have an acute awareness of issues of difference and how this relates to educational choice and selection. However, I would argue that the process of HE choice is different from that of choosing a secondary school or sixth-form college in several important respects. First, young people themselves are much more likely to be actively involved in choosing a higher education institution than a secondary school due to the age difference and the requirements of the application process. Second, the level of selection differs markedly between HE and school or college. Although Emily Davies College did set minimum requirements (in terms of GCSE grades) for most of its courses, none of the young people had difficulty being accepted. Thus, level of GCSE attainment relative to friends would have carried little significance for most of the young people in terms of entry to particular courses (or institutions). Furthermore, as around 70 per cent of young people now go on to full-time, post-compulsory education (rising to about 91 per cent of those with five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C) (DfES, 2001d), the post-16 transition was not a particularly significant one for these young people: few had many close friends who had chosen to leave education after their GCSEs. For these reasons, young people's higher education choices can be seen as qualitatively different from those they made about their sixth-form education and help to explain why differences, such as that in academic attainment, came to carry a new level of significance.

Few studies that have focussed on educational choice have alluded to the importance of maintaining a mutual perception of equality in friendships. The exception is Ball *et al.*'s (2000) research in which brief mention is made of the difficulties 'high-achieving Rachel'

faced talking to her old school friends about her higher education choices 'because she did not want to sound as if she was bragging' (p.80), particularly when her friends did not have the same choices available to them. The differences in attainment between friends at Emily Davies College were often not as great as those between Rachel and her friends who had 'scraped through their GCSEs and are scraping through their A Levels' (ibid.). However, for some of the Emily Davies students, comparison with friends was potentially more difficult because they involved some 'repositioning' for those who had previously considered themselves to be 'high achievers' (particularly in the case of Zoë and Charlotte's friendship group).

#### **4.4 Non-hierarchical differences**

Throughout the interviews the young people also highlighted a number of other types of difference that, they claimed, had served to restrict their conversations about higher education. There was little evidence, however, that these were positioned hierarchically, in the same way as the differences discussed above. The exception to this was the construction of subject difference: whether or not hierarchical judgements were attached to this varied between friendship groups.

##### **4.4.1 Different subjects**

Across the sample as a whole, subjects and specific courses were generally not 'ranked' by the young people in the same way as higher education institutions (although there were a few notable exceptions, discussed above and in Chapter Five). The evidence from the students suggests that it was the instrumental or pragmatic nature of such conversations that was of more concern. Charlotte was typical of many when she explained that she had not engaged her friends in talk about university because they were planning to do different things and thus would not be of much practical help to her:

Rachel:        Have you talked about universities much with her [close friend, interested in teaching]?

Charlotte:    No, cos I'm not interested in teaching. It doesn't really interest me....it's just if they are doing different courses it's a bit irrelevant.  
(Interview 3)

This was echoed by others who suggested that, unless their friends were applying to do the same subject, there would be little point in discussing their choices. For example, Paul claimed:

It's a bit difficult to discuss universities and courses when they are completely different courses to the ones you...I mean [a friend] was thinking of doing media. Well, I can't say one university is better for media and marketing than another because I just don't know. But with people who are doing law, you can discuss it with them and say, 'Why did you choose that?' (Interview 4)

#### **4.4.2 Different stages of the decision-making process**

Throughout the two-year longitudinal study there was considerable variation between the young people in the point in time at which they gave serious consideration to their HE options and thus, in many cases, the point at which higher education was discussed. Although this differed between friendship groups to some extent, there were also significant differences between individuals within the same group.

##### *Evidence of difficulties*

Throughout the first year of their A Level or GNVQ studies, several young people claimed that they had not discussed their higher education choices with their friends because none of them had started thinking seriously about their options. For example, in the summer term of the first year, Sarah explained that 'It's hard to maintain a long conversation based on universities because we really don't know much about it at all' (Interview 3). However, there were also some young people who had started thinking about higher education but who felt they were unable to talk to their friends about it, as they were not at the same stage of the process. Becky and Zoë highlighted the differences within their friendship groups:

Becky: I don't think any of them have been to any open days at all and I'm sort of taking days off here, there and everywhere to go to open days and they're like saying, 'We haven't even thought about it. We didn't even realise they were now.' (Interview 3)

Rachel: Why do you think you haven't talked about it much with your friends?

Zoë: I think cos they haven't really done much to do with it...because we all...all of us aren't at the same stage, that's probably why.  
(Interview 3)

This became a much more prominent theme when the young people reached their second year: by then most had been required to start thinking about higher education because of the impending deadline for UCAS applications. Despite these common deadlines and a common college HE programme, many claimed that one reason they had not discussed their choices with their friends was because they were at different stages of the decision-making and/or application process. Zoë, again, speculated:

I guess cos I had my UCAS form done so early they got to talk about that and I was like, 'Oh well, I've done mine', [that] kind of thing. (Interview 4)

### *The 'distance' of HE*

In many ways, these differences in the timing of HE-related activities and choices, and thus talk, was determined by how distant the young people perceived higher education to be. Those who considered it a long way off had less motivation than others to think about their options, make decisions and talk about it with their friends. For example, at the time of the second round of interviews (during the young people's second term in the college), those who had started thinking seriously about courses and institutions all considered higher education to be relatively close. Becky and Zoë were typical of this group:

Becky: I started to feel quite nervous, thinking about it [university] being so soon, that we have to start thinking about it and applying, and just the thought that you're not going to be at college for very long.  
(Interview 2)

Zoë: It's getting...I know you're not applying till next year but you still have to start thinking about it so you don't leave it all to the last minute. (Interview 2)

Furthermore, at this point several students indicated that they were already drawing on their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) to identify and pursue specific activities which they felt

would strengthen their university applications. Zoë had begun work in an old people's home (in preparation for her application to read medicine), and Simon talked about taking up a sport to signal his 'rounded personality'. For others, however, higher education was a distant prospect and a low priority. Jim claimed:

It's quite a way away. Well, it's not really but I think it is and I really don't think it's worth worrying too much about at the moment. (Interview 2)

In Jim's friendship group and in some others, conversation instead revolved around more immediate concerns such as coursework, exams and social life. In many ways these differences reflect those revealed by Ball *et al.* (2000) in their study of young people in Greater London. They argue that the future was not of equal importance to all their respondents: some were 'planners' while others showed 'a disposition towards the present, a sense of deferral' (p.145), placing emphasis instead on leisure and pleasure.

These differences in outlook were maintained throughout the study. For example, during the fifth round of interviews (during the spring term of the second year), when most of the young people were coming to a decision about their firm and insurance offers, several of the 'planners' were already giving serious consideration to their plans for when they *left* university:

Becky: Now that I know that university is sort...well, it's not like completely sorted but it does all seem like fairly finalised – now I've just got to get the grades and I'm going there. Now I've suddenly started thinking: 'What am I going to do after I leave?' So I had a free [lesson] the other day and no one was around so I went on the computer in here looking at postgraduate courses in journalism and things like this. (Interview 5)

In the accounts of these young people, the reflexive 'life planning' discussed by Giddens (1991) and du Bois Reymond (1998) is played out. Their life plans, or the 'substantial content of the reflexively organised trajectory of the self' (Giddens, 1991, p.85), were on-going projects throughout the two years of the study and serve to distinguish them from the other young people in the study. The differences between these young people and the others

involved in the research also provide a good illustration of du Bois Reymond's (1998) distinction between 'choice' and 'normal' biographies.

Amongst the students at Emily Davies College, there was a strong correlation between level of attainment (in terms of GCSE grades and predicted A Level results) and such considerations about time and life course. Previous studies have highlighted strong class-based differences in relation to conceptualisations of 'educational life' (Bernstein, 1997) and acquisition of cultural capital (Allat, 1996; Brown, 1997; Reay, 1998b). However, in this project, such attitudes were more evidently associated with academic attainment than with either social class or level of parental education (see Table 3 in Chapter Three). A possible explanation could be that the young people were working with different time frames; the high achievers had always been certain that they would go on to higher education and so choosing a university seemed like an obvious next step, the natural progression from college. For others, who had not been considering higher education from an early age, it may have seemed more of a significant move, very different from college. This is supported by evidence from four students (during the three interviews in the first year) who stated that they were unwilling to think about higher education because it involved making significant decisions about their futures. These anxieties certainly help to explain why some young people did not discuss higher education in any depth with many friends and peers during their first year at college and are explored further in section 4.6, below.

#### *Differing amounts of 'free' time*

The timing of talk was also related to the amount of time the young people had available to start thinking about their HE choices and to research various options. Differences here were more common between friendship groups than within them, and also showed a correlation with academic ability. In the first year at college, many students stated that they had had little time to devote to thinking about higher education because of coursework, exams and/or problems coping with the volume of work. For example, during the third round of interviews, several students explained how they had decided not to go any open days because they believed that their college work would suffer:

Rachel:           Have you visited any universities yet?

Jim: No....I couldn't miss college cos we have been doing a lot of work lately and I couldn't afford to miss it cos it's a whole day.  
(Interview 3)

Rachel: Is that something you are thinking about, going to visit any universities?

Liz: Yeah but where they're all...they're all now, aren't they? And like I said, we're starting our coursework so we haven't had any time cos you've got to miss college so.... (Interview 3)

Again, differences corresponded to academic ability, with the higher achievers (such as Becky, Paul, Charlotte and Zoë) attending more open days and spending more time on other higher education-related activities. Steve represented the extreme of this end of the continuum:

Rachel: Would you say it's something you've been thinking about a lot this term?

Steve: I would say 'continuously'. Even before the exams, when I was revising, I was picking up prospectuses and thinking, 'If I could get that grade, that would bring that course into the equation.' It was quite distracting, actually. (Interview 3)

Such differences can be explained in terms of differing priorities, with the 'high achievers' believing that HE-related research was more urgent than did their peers (in line with the evidence about the different perceptions of the 'distance' of HE, discussed above). However, it appears that even when other students came to think it was important to start giving serious consideration to their HE options, they had less time available to devote to relevant activities and thus their 'time deficit' was widened. While some were having difficulty finding time to read prospectuses and attend open days, others were, in contrast, pursuing a number of extra-curricular activities which they would draw upon in their UCAS personal statements: Zoë, Charlotte and Paul all shadowed relevant professionals. In addition, Zoë worked in a nursing home throughout her time at Emily Davies College and Paul spent an hour a week working in a voluntary capacity for a local member of parliament (he applied to read law and politics).



Thus, while the college's HE programme may have presupposed a common timetable for HE applications, the HE-related activities that the young people took part in, and their attitudes to the future, ensured that many perceived themselves to be at a very different stage from their friends. The evidence from the young people suggests that, again, it was difficult for them to raise issues about their HE applications because of these differences. Paul articulated the feelings of many of the students when he described the importance of being perceived as at the same stage as his friends:

- Paul: People are quite cagey about it. They don't like to say too much.
- Rachel: Why do you think that is?
- Paul: I don't know. Probably cos they don't know what stage everyone else is at.
- Rachel: Why do you think they are being cagey about it?
- Paul: Because they don't want to be perceived as slack if they haven't [thought about it]. And they don't want to be perceived as being too knowledgeable about all these places [if they have thought about it].
- (Interview 3)

#### **4.4.3 The significance of difference**

The differences discussed in this section were not positioned hierarchically by the young people and, for this reason, may not appear particularly important when considered on an individual basis. However, when combined with the other emerging differences between close friends (discussed in 4.3, above), they may have gained greater significance. It seems that as the students became aware of the emerging differences between themselves and their close friends and the assumption of different places on emerging hierarchies, they chose to foreclose a number of possible conversations that may have highlighted these differences. For example, an awareness of other differences may have affected the degree to which the subjects other people were interested in were perceived as 'similar' or not. Both Zoë and Charlotte emphasised the way in which they perceived their HE choices as different. However, compared to most of their peers, they appeared to have a lot in common:

- Rachel: Why do you say you've got less in common with them [close friends]?

Zoë: I have. I think it's really hard to explain. I guess because, even though we're kind of doing similar subjects, I mean we're....it seems that we're not, [that] we're doing completely different subjects.  
(Interview 4)

Furthermore, it would seem that by avoiding discussions with those perceived as at a different stage of the process, those interested in a different subject or those with different amounts of time to spend on the decision-making process, young people may have viewed the role of their friends in a very pragmatic way. By excluding those constructed as 'different', the students seemed to be defining an instrumental role for their friends. Higher education was reserved as a topic of conversation for close friends only if they served some 'pragmatic' purpose. This appears to be a good illustration of Roberts' (1995) 'structured fragmentation': although young people's life chances (and thus their higher education opportunities) remain, to a large extent, structured, the individualistic way in which young people conceive them 'reduces solidaristic sentiments and conceptions of mutual interest' (p.116).

#### **4.5 Alternative sources of advice**

Only a small number of young people explicitly contrasted the contribution of their family and their teachers to their thinking about higher education with that of their friends. However, evidence from the interviews suggests that as direct advice was provided for many young people by parents and, to a lesser extent, teachers, this obviated the need for them to seek specific information from their friends. Furthermore, differing familial assumptions about higher education may have exacerbated the difficulty of engaging in conversations with friends.

##### **4.5.1 Family**

Familial influence was perceived in a largely negative way by many of the students when asked about it directly in the interviews. The young people may have felt that admitting to having been influenced by family, in answer to a direct question, may have compromised their sense of their own agency and their sense of themselves as 'independent' people. However, in response to other questions, many of the young people outlined a considerable level of familial involvement.

### *The nature of familial influence*

Very few of the young people in this sample had parents who had gone on to higher education themselves (see Table 3 in Chapter Three). Although there were some broad correlations between parental class/education and involvement in the process of HE choice (for example, the families who were least involved were those without educational qualifications, and in the lowest social class group – see the discussion of Lucy and Liz, below), the parents who were most involved were not those with a degree.

Five of the fifteen young people described what can be seen as a joint process of decision-making, with at least one of their parents heavily involved throughout. These students are similar to the ‘composite’ choosers identified by Foskett and Hesketh (1997) in their study of post-16 choice. Becky and Steve were typical of this group:

Becky: I’ve been talking to them loads about university and everything and telling them my impression of all the universities and what I think. Me and my mum sat down with all the prospectuses that I collected. We went through and looked at them and she helped me whittle them down....it was my mum helped me to say, ‘You don’t want to go somewhere like that.’ So she did have quite a big say. (Interview 4)

Steve: Generally the way it goes is I’ll find some course which we haven’t previously discussed and I’ll moot it to him [dad] and he either puts it down or....he just says ‘Oh, that’ll be all right’ and I take that as a sign of his approval and it kind of gets added on to things. (Interview 3)

Within this ‘joint’ process of decision-making, but also in the case of other young people whose parents were less involved on a day-to-day basis, several types of influence can be identified. First, parents, step-parents and, to a lesser extent, siblings provided a considerable amount of practical help to the young people. This ranged from help with writing personal statements, in the case of Mark and Sarah, to asking specific questions at university open days, for Clare and Sunita. Furthermore, Zoë’s mother had used her links with a colleague at work to help her daughter’s application to medical school:

Zoë: My mum's a secretary at Cherry Tree Hospital and one of the consultants there looks through the applications for Southampton [medical school] and she's been getting me information and things like that. And he said he'd arrange some time after the exam period if I wanted to go out with one of the community psychiatric nurses or something, on call. So that would be another good thing to put on my CV and personal application [on the UCAS form]. (Interview 2)

Second, almost all the young people reported receiving some explicit advice from their family about, for example, specific institutions (particularly in terms of reputation, location and cost), courses and the timing of their applications. Third, less direct types of influence were also evident throughout the two years and included certain assumptions made by the family to which the young people alluded. In many cases these types of influence underpinned and, to some extent determined, the more direct advice and practical help which parents gave. In some families there was a strong expectation that the young person would go on to university and this militated against the serious consideration of any other options. Paul articulated this clearly:

Rachel: Do you have any plans or what you're going to do when you leave college?

Paul: Well, I'm definitely going to university. But, interestingly, I never presumed that I wouldn't go to university. That's probably a reflection on my parents, actually. I was never given an option....Until a few years ago I honestly didn't realise that some people didn't go to university.

Rachel: Why did you think that?

Paul: ....All their [parents'] friends are either teachers or solicitors or barristers or professional people. So I've never...it sounds terrible...but it's not as if we know people who have 'jobs' [as opposed to 'careers']....We just don't know anyone like that. It's not cos we're toffs or anything, it's just that we haven't come across them. (Interview 1)

There is also evidence of differing assumptions about the purpose of HE amongst the young people and it seems likely that these also originated within the family. Four of the students (Clare, Jim Lucy and Sunita) emphasised the vocational role of higher education and saw the courses they were interested in primarily as preparation for specific jobs in the labour market – similar to the ‘utilitarian trainers’ in Williams’ (1997) typology. At various points in the interviews, they indicated that their parents shared these perceptions:

Sunita: They [parents] are just saying do something worthwhile and not something stupid.

Rachel: What do they mean by that?

Sunita: Where you can find a job. Don’t do a degree where you can’t find a job at all, like law or something like that. There are too many people with law degrees and people can’t find jobs. You need something, the security, with the hope that you can get a job. That’s really what they’ve been saying. (Interview 3)

Other young people understood the nature and purpose of higher education in different ways but, again, these appeared to be closely related to their parents’ or step-parents’ perceptions. Simon and Steve, for example, were much less concerned with the vocational relevance of their degree and placed more emphasis on higher education as a ‘rite of passage’ and the more general ‘liberal education’ that it would provide. Again, these views accorded with those held by their parents.

Other assumptions shared by many of the young people and their families focussed on the location of the university and, in particular, its distance from home. This was an important consideration for many and almost all had, from a relatively early stage in their deliberations about HE, a very definite idea about how far away from home they wanted to be. Few students considered HEIs that were not within this nominal range. Many students supported their own views on this with comments from their parents, suggesting that ideas about an ‘appropriate distance’ were constructed within the family.

Sunita: I told them that I didn’t want to go too far away and they were saying that as well. (Interview 4)

Paul: That's another thing: they are keen for me to move out. They think I should have the experience of leaving home – well, they both left home. (Interview 4)

The young people's views of the importance of a university's status or reputation were also reflected in what they reported of their parents' perceptions. The five students who attached most importance to status (Becky, Paul, Simon, Steve and Sunita) all claimed that their parents held similar views. Simon was typical of this group, stating that his father believed, 'It doesn't matter what degree you get, it's where you go' (Interview 4). Equally, there was congruence between the views of the students who were less aware of status differences or who attached less importance to them, and those of their parents. This role that the family played in constructing a hierarchy of institutions is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, as is the way in which assumptions differed from family to family, even amongst this sample from broadly similar social classes.

Only two students had no, or very little, practical or direct parental input into their decisions: Liz and Lucy. (As mentioned above, Liz's family were in the lowest social class classification, while Lucy's parents had no educational qualifications. This distinguished them from the other young people in the sample.) The assumptions made by their families were, nonetheless, influential in determining their approach to HE choice. Both young women expressed anxiety about higher education at various points over the two-year period and were less committed to going on to university than most of the other young people. Both also adopted strategies for coping with the decision-making process: Lucy chose to focus exclusively on one particular HEI, with which she strongly identified at an early stage, while Liz delegated many of her HE-related decisions to her friend Michelle. Their choices are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

### *Impact on discussions with friends*

It seems that as families provided a high level of practical help, as well as advice, throughout the period in which young people were considering their HE choices, the need to turn to friends for this kind of support was reduced. Indeed, some students felt that their families were much better placed to provide this type of support than were their friends. Two young women explicitly contrasted the roles of family and friends in the decision-making process. Clare explained her decision to rely primarily on her family for help and advice about higher

education because she thought they were more likely to give her an honest opinion than her friends:

Go [to an open day] with friends and they'll say 'Oh it's really nice' even if they don't like it. Go with your family and they will tell you the truth. (Interview 4)

Similarly, Sunita believed her family to be a more reliable source of advice than her friends as they were concerned solely with her interests. She claimed that her friends may well have different priorities from her, basing their advice on aspects of university life that were relatively unimportant to her, such as the nightlife.

However, another interpretation is also possible. The very different assumptions made by the young people's families may have effectively hindered discussions between friends. The young people were acutely aware that not all their friends shared their own views of, for example, the significance they attached to the status of a university or, equally, the importance (or not) of moving away from home. In some cases, these differing familial assumptions may have served to emphasise some of the other emerging differences between the young people discussed earlier in this chapter. This may have provided further motivation to foreclose discussion about HE.

Although some recent theorising (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) has suggested that the role of the family is declining as young people take increasing responsibility for constructing their own futures, the continuing importance of the family in young people's social and educational lives has been well-documented by other studies (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Ball *et al.*, 2002; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Pugsley, 1998; Reay, 1998a; Roberts and Allen, 1997). Where this study differs from these is in emphasising the complexity of the nature of familial influence amongst young people from *broadly similar* social classes. As discussed in Chapter Two, several recent studies have contrasted the heightened awareness of the relative status of HEIs within middle class families with the less differentiated view of working class families (for example, Ball *et al.*, 2002). They have also emphasised the different 'socio-scapes' inhabited by those from different social classes (Ball *et al.*, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001b) and the differences in the extent to which working class young people and their middle class peers identify with the supposed culture of universities and HE colleges (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). The picture amongst the fifteen

Emily Davies students was much less clear-cut. There was no obvious correlation between social class and, for example, assumptions about university status or location. In many ways, the complexity of the familial influence in this study seems to reflect that revealed by Ball *et al.* (2000) in their study of young people's educational choices in the Greater London area. They found that while the family played an important role in career-planning, forming social perspectives and generating resources for identity formation, patterns of support, dependence and obligation were often complex. Both the importance of familial influence and its complexity were evident in this project.

#### 4.5.2 Teachers

For some young people, teachers also seem to have exerted a stronger explicit influence than friends by providing practical help and/or advice. However, the role of teachers in the decision-making process differed considerably between students, as did the young people's responses to their involvement. The most common way in which teachers at the college were involved directly in young people's decisions was by providing advice about courses, 'suitable institutions', and criteria for making decisions. Several students indicated that their teachers had given them advice (often unsolicited) during parents' evenings, in the context of their progress to date and their options for the future.

Liz: I was talking to my law teacher about universities cos I said about Portsmouth and she reckons I should aim higher and go for more colleges that are looking for A and B entries instead of like the lower status ones. (Interview 3)

For Jim, advice from teachers was particularly influential in encouraging him to think seriously about university:

Rachel: You know you said you were thinking of not going to university at all – when did you change your mind?

Jim: [At the parents' evening]...when I was speaking to my maths teacher it all changed. I always thought I wasn't clever enough to get into university and it helps having a bit of praise once in a while, you know. (Interview 4)



Several students outlined various ways in which their teachers had provided practical help or support with their decisions and UCAS applications. Becky's history teacher had arranged for her to resit the end of year exam, so that he could predict her a higher grade, while the college's Oxbridge coordinator had suggested a suitable college for her to apply to (based on his assessment of where she would be most likely to be accepted). Her history teacher had also loaned her a book, prior to her interview at Oxford, and suggested questions that he thought it likely she would be asked. Sarah described how a teacher had become involved in her own application. She was keen to study creative writing at university and was required to take a portfolio of her work to her interview. She had approached an English teacher in the college who did some creative writing herself and asked if she would be prepared to look through her portfolio for her.

The young people's responses to such advice varied considerably. A few had deliberately sought out the advice of teachers on particular matters, sometimes contrasting the teachers' position of knowledge with that of their friends. During the autumn term of his second year, Paul had started to think about applying to read law and politics, instead of single honours law:

Paul: I asked a few of my teachers what they thought of it. I didn't ask them what they thought of me doing it; I asked them what they thought of these joint degrees, just because I didn't know anything about them. I didn't know if they were seen as being...less or worth more....

Rachel: Why do you think you didn't discuss that with your friends?

Paul: I don't know. I suppose they don't know any more about it than I do. I think there'd have been little point in discussing it with them.

(Interview 4)

Other students, however, placed much less weight on the opinions of their teachers, often suggesting that they knew less about the subject they were applying for than they did. For example, when writing the personal statement for her UCAS form, Zoë contrasted what her teachers had told her to write with what she had picked up from her wider reading on medicine, the work shadowing she had done and the conference she had attended for those interested in studying medicine:

Most of them [teachers] say 'Write why you picked your A Level subjects and what you do out of college'. But I knew for medicine you had to write about the work experience you've had and how that influences your view of like the subject and I knew you had to do that. (Interview 4)

Thus, the influence of teachers can be seen to be much less important than that of family for most of the students in the sample. However, the advice and practical support offered by some members of staff, and the construction of this as 'expert knowledge' by some of the young people may have further restricted the instrumental role (discussed by, for example, Willmott (1987) and Allan (1996)) that friends were able to assume.

#### **4.6 Anxiety about the transition**

There is also evidence that some young people may have wanted to restrict all talk about HE as a result of their own anxiety about making a decision, getting in to their chosen university or college or the nature of higher education itself. During their first year, Lucy, Rich and Jim claimed that one of the reasons they had not talked to their friends at any length about higher education was because it seemed such a big and significant decision. By refusing to discuss it, they were able to postpone any difficult decisions, thus avoiding having to confront potential worries about their future:

Lucy: I think in a way I'm scared about thinking about my future. I think the longer I stay in education the longer I don't have to think about fending for myself. But I just don't want to think about it.  
(Interview 2)

Rich: I'm not worried as such but I'd prefer to not have to think about it yet, if you know what I mean. I mean, after university there is no more education that you can carry on with doing unless it's around that course...like I have to plan my final, final thing now. I dunno...I'd prefer to wait a while and drag it out as long as possible.

Rachel: So are you actually finding it quite difficult to make yourself think about it now because you feel like that?

Rich: Not difficult, just unwilling. (Interview 3)

Jim: It's quite a big thing to do, like 'What are you going to do?' You've got to keep at it for four years and it's quite a big step and I thought, 'No, I can't be bothered about that yet. It's too much of a hassle.'  
(Interview 3)

Some of the young people felt anxious about the process of gaining a place in a university or college and claimed that they avoided talk of HE for this reason:

Liz: When you're with your friends you don't want to talk about homework and universities and everything like that cos then it gets you panicking and everything.

Rachel: Panicking about what?

Liz: Well, like the UCAS deadlines, then about going to university, and to get there you've got to do your exams. Then you realise that it's not that far away until your exams. (Interview 4)

Similarly, Liz acknowledged that there were aspects of higher education such as the length of the course and the exams she would have to sit about which she felt anxious and deliberately had not brought up with her friends. A small number of young people were not necessarily anxious for themselves, but were aware that higher education was a difficult topic for some of their friends to discuss because of their own anxieties. Thus, they avoided discussing their higher education decisions out of consideration for their friends. Jim, for example, reported that his girlfriend: 'Never wants to talk about it....because she's dreading it, going away from home' (Interview 4). This theme is developed further in Chapter Six.

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the young people at Emily Davies College did not discuss their higher education deliberations, or indeed their choices, with their friends at any length. This contrasts with the high profile given to peer and friend influences in previous quantitative studies of young people's higher education choice. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily inconsistent with such findings. Roberts and Allen (1997), for example, state that over 70 per cent of their respondents had discussed their choice of both subject and institution with their friends. However, they do not shed any light upon the content and length of such

discussions, the number of friends with whom discussions were held or upon the nature of the friendships of the young people in the sample. Indeed, it would be difficult for a quantitative study to provide this level of detail. My research at Emily Davies College would suggest that while a majority of students may tell at least some of their friends where they are planning to apply and for what subject, Roberts and Allen's statistics (and those that have emerged from several other quantitative studies) mask both the complexity of the process of talking about HE choices with friends and the often problematic nature of such discussions.

The absence of many such HE-related conversations between friends, and some of the comments of the Emily Davies students about the importance of making an 'individual choice', may seem to support the 'individualization' thesis put forward by Beck (1992). He argues that since the 1970s, and as a result of specific historical developments in the labour market, 'people have lost their traditional support networks and have had to rely on themselves and their own individual (labour market) fate with all its attendant risks, opportunities and contradictions' (p.92) and goes on to suggest that the individual, rather than the family (or other social group) has become the means of social reproduction, mediated by the market. The young people in this study certainly made extensive use of the language of individualization, reflecting the rhetoric widely employed by both education professionals and policy-makers (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). However, although there is strong evidence that the young people did not engage their close friends in discussions about higher education very frequently or, often, at any length, a detailed analysis of the data suggests that it cannot be explained simply in terms of Beck's individualization thesis. Instead, I have argued that they avoided conversations about their likely HE choice because, for many of them, such discussions were often extremely difficult.

Many of these difficulties stemmed from the hierarchical judgements that the young people made about differences (particularly those concerned with academic attainment, higher education institution and, to a limited extent, degree subject). Such hierarchical judgements served, in many cases, to undermine the perceived equality of the friendship tie, or at least to emphasise previously latent differences, and for this reason were avoided. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) claim that by placing undue emphasis on the individual nature of decisions, underlying and continuing class relationships are obscured – what they describe as the 'epistemological fallacy of late modernity' (p.5). This term has resonance within the present

study: taking young people's claims about the importance of 'individual choices' at face value may serve to obscure the tensions inherent in many of their friendships.

In part, such hierarchical positioning of HE options can be seen as a result of competition between friends and peers. Indeed, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) also noted the competitive focus to many conversations about university between the young people involved in their study of HE choice. In part, these trends may be explained by the competitive culture of many educational institutions (Lesko, 2001), and the awareness of the wider institutions of social and economic reproduction that is heightened during 'youth' (MacDonald *et al.*, 2001). However, Savage's (2000) work also provides a convincing explanation of some of the sensitivities around educational attainment and likely higher education destination that were evident among the Emily Davies students. He maintains that the last three decades have witnessed a shift in modes of class awareness<sup>8</sup>, which have resulted in a decline in vertical comparisons (i.e. with those perceived to be 'above' and 'below' one in the hierarchy of social classes) and a simultaneous increase in horizontal comparisons – with those judged to be of the same social position. Within this model, competition with friends and peers is heightened and becomes an important means of defining oneself.

The overwhelming evidence that the young people in this study were not sharing with many of their close friends their thoughts and decisions about what many of them claimed was a very important stage in their lives also provides a strong contrast to many of the assumptions that pervade both the social psychological literature on adolescent friendships and sociological theorising on the 'pure relationship'. As outlined in Chapter One, theorists such as Giddens (1992), Beck (1992) and Pahl (1998) place great emphasis on the importance of intimacy, disclosure and the sharing of life plans within close friendships. Indeed, they maintain that pure relationships develop only 'to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other' (Giddens, 1992, p.62). However, the evidence from this study, that most respondents sought to avoid or

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<sup>8</sup> Savage argues that, over the last 30 years, a working class sense of individual identity has been replaced by middle class modes of individualization. He maintains that an emphasis on the autonomous (male) individual was central to working class culture in Britain and suggests that this has now been replaced by a new form of 'self-developmental' individualization, based on particular kinds of middle class employment relations. Instead of seeing this as a break with the past, Savage argues that class cultures have been powerful in the past, and are so now, through being individualized in various, historically-specific ways.

conceal certain thoughts and decisions from their friends, suggests that many of the young people's close friendships were not based on this level of mutual disclosure. Instead, it supports Jamieson's (1998) contention that the constraints placed on friendships by social divisions, amongst others, 'illustrate how far removed everyday friendships are from the "pure relationship"' (p.105). The impact of HE choice on the nature of the young people's friendships is explored in more depth in Chapter Six.

In explaining the absence of HE-related discussion between friends, it is also important to consider the alternative sources of support that were available to the young people in the study. In terms of advice and practical help with choices and applications, they were able to draw on the resources of their families and, in some cases, their teachers. Thus, the instrumental role of friends (illustrated in, for example, studies by Willmott (1987) and Jerrome (1984)) was marginalized. It may be the case that young people in other social contexts, with fewer material resources to draw on and with parents less able or willing to engage in their child's decision-making process, may place greater weight on the information and advice that can be passed on by friends. However, at Emily Davies College, the two students who had no direct parental input into their choices (Lucy and Liz) showed few signs of discussing their choices with friends at greater length than the other young people in the sample.

This chapter has highlighted the 'absence of discussion' about higher education between friends. It does not, however, follow from this that friends do not have much influence over young people's HE decisions. Chapter Five will explore the ways in which friends and peers have exerted an influence – through a limited number of 'direct' or 'explicit' means but primarily through more implicit influences. It will argue that friends and the wider peer group provided the context in which young people came to construct a 'hierarchy of students'. Through social and academic comparisons with other young people, they came to work out their own place on this emerging hierarchy. This allowed students to 'map' their own position relative to their peers onto a similar ranking of universities and, thus, to decide which institutions represented a 'feasible' choice.

## CHAPTER FIVE. THE ROLE OF FRIENDS AND PEERS

### 5.1 Introduction

In their study of the career and HE choices of American students, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) claim that:

Friends are important to young people's lives and help to shape their sense of self, but they have a limited influence on educational goals and career plans...the decision about which college to attend and what occupation to pursue are based on a student's individual interests, strengths and talents, and are unlikely to be influenced by the fluid social groups to which an adolescent belongs. (p.211)

In contrast, despite the 'differences and difficulties' outlined in Chapter Four, this chapter will argue that friends and peers played an extremely important role in the process of HE choice. Although the young people at Emily Davies College engaged in few sustained conversations with their friends about the decisions they were making, their sense of their own academic standing relative to others was derived from comparisons with friends. While such judgements did not always correspond to the actual grades that the young people attained, they were nonetheless of considerable importance when they came to decide which HE institutions and courses represented a 'feasible' choice for them. Indeed, rankings within friendship groups and between friends were, in many cases, transposed directly onto a hierarchy of HE institutions and courses.

This chapter will also outline the various ways in which the Emily Davies students came to understand the structure of the HE sector (in most cases drawing on the cultural resources of their families) and the different, but usually hierarchical, ways in which they categorised HE institutions and courses. On the basis of these distinctions, it argues that diversity amongst those of a similar middle class position has not been adequately theorised in previous studies of HE choice.

## 5.2 Hierarchies of students

### 5.2.1 Ranking of friends and friendship groups

As discussed in Chapter Four, throughout the two years of the research, it was apparent that almost all of the young people were aware of what they perceived to be their academic standing relative to their friends and peers and, for some, this positioning was of great importance (both for university entry and their own sense of identity). During the interviews, many of the young people described differences between themselves and their friends in terms of their levels of academic attainment. For some, such as Charlotte and Zoë, this awareness came from a constant (and explicit) comparison of grades:

Charlotte: Although we're really good friends, when it comes to a test and stuff, we are quite competitive.

Rachel: So do you compare your grades and things like that?

Charlotte: Yeah! The minute the grades come through everyone's on the phone, 'What did you get?!' (Interview 2)

Zoë: They're so competitive as well. They seemed so competitive when I joined their group. It's like...and she's [Gillian] the most competitive out of all of them – and, apart from Amy, overall, she's the cleverest, Gillian, but she's the most competitive. She has to make the grades. (Interview 6)

Within their groups this was exacerbated by the comparisons that were also made by teachers. For others, it was a product of more subtle processes of comparison, rarely discussed by group members.

Such comparisons, whether explicit or implicit, resulted in a series of 'rankings' in which the young people placed themselves in some kind of hierarchical order, relative to others in their friendship group and wider social networks. This was as much the case for groups in which members were fairly similar in terms of level of academic attainment as for those in which the disparities were considerably greater. For example, Steve described his own friendship group as a 'cascade, a waterfall downwards' – from Joe and Bhupinder, who frequently got As at school and college, to Marco who was doing a GNVQ (Interview 2). However, in



Charlotte and Zoë's group, the grades obtained by the young women (for GCSEs, college tests and, ultimately, A Levels) were much more similar than in Steve and Mark's group. Nonetheless, as shown in Chapter Four, the ranking was equally hierarchical, with Charlotte and Zoë both very aware of the small differences in their attainment levels.

These rankings were constructed not only *within* friendship groups; there was also a considerable degree of comparison *between* groups of friends. Charlotte, Clare and Zoë, for example, all considered that they belonged to relatively high-achieving groups and this seemed to be an important part of their group's identity. Sarah also described how a few of her friends had moved into a new friendship group, predicated upon common levels of high achievement and a view of themselves as 'clever and intellectual' (Interview 6). In contrast, Steve characterised his group as lacking a 'work culture' (despite the presence of what he saw as a couple of 'high achievers') (Interview 6).

Several young people were aware of both their own standing relative to their close friends and the position of their friendship group relative to other groups. Indeed, those who were most acutely aware of intra-group differences were also very sensitive to differences between groups (Charlotte, Steve and Zoë). For example, Charlotte recognised that she was someone with 'high grades' compared to others in the college, and that her friendship group was a high-achieving one. Nevertheless, she was much less confident about her own standing within her friendship group and, throughout the two years, she frequently compared herself, unfavourably, with Zoë. These intra- and inter-group comparisons were evident in the accounts of many of the young people who took part in the research.

For others, the role of the group assumed less importance, and yet a sense of ranking emerged equally strongly in their narratives. For example, Paul was not part of any particularly close friendship group (see Appendix 3 for a description of his friendship network). As he had no immediate or obvious reference group with which to make comparisons, his rankings were based on other points of comparison with the wider student body. Ongoing comparison of grades with friends and others in his subject groups determined how he viewed his standing relative to his peers – and this 'self-positioning' changed significantly over the course of the research. In the first interview, he explained how his academic attainment was not exceptional, compared to the people he knew at his secondary school. However, by the time of the next interview he had discovered that his grades were actually very good compared to

the other Emily Davies students, and had changed his self-positioning accordingly. This change also had a significant impact upon his higher education deliberations and is discussed further below.

In their study of the ways in which 'ability' is socially constructed, Gillborn and Youdell (2001) argue that teachers and other education professionals share the same basic understanding of 'ability' as 'a fixed, measurable and generalized academic potential' (p.79). The evidence from this research suggests that while the Emily Davies students certainly seemed to view ability as measurable and generalized, they were more ambivalent about whether or not it was fixed. Paul's changing view of his own academic identity (discussed further in 5.4.2), and the changes to rankings within Zoë and Charlotte's group over the two-year period (outlined in Chapter Four), indicate that some of the young people, at least, perceived ability in more fluid terms.

Some educationalists would undoubtedly argue that the ranking and self-positioning evident amongst the Emily Davies students is both healthy and useful, echoing Parsons' (1983) contention that differentiation and selection are important functions of the education system, resulting in an effective and efficient 'allocation of its human resources relative to the adult role system' (p.96). However, this functionalist interpretation is predicated upon, amongst other things, the assumption that the young people were making 'correct' comparisons between themselves and their friends and peers, and that such comparisons were being made purely on the grounds of 'merit' or, as Parsons maintains, 'that the main process of differentiation takes place on a single main axis of achievement' (p.87). To test the validity of such claims, it seems important to explore in more detail the basis of the rankings and the precise ways in which the young people derived their sense of their own position relative to others.

### **5.2.2 The basis of the rankings**

#### *The language of academic attainment*

The language in which the young people talked about these 'rankings' of friends and peers focussed largely on notions of actual academic attainment and typically emphasised: GCSE grades, the results of college tests and modules and/or the grades they had been predicted by teachers for their A Levels. For example, Steve described the differences between his friends in this way:

I think there's quite a big gulf. There's like Joe and Bhupinder who are pretty much up there; then there's like Ben, Jamie and perhaps me who are in the mid-range band, like Bs and Cs; and then there's probably Mark and Sam and Pete who'd probably be chuffed to bits to get away with three Cs. Yes, it's a pretty wide spectrum.

(Interview 2)

The language used by Steve, and most of the other young people involved in the research, reflects the meritocratic assumptions that pervade much recent educational policy in relation to both secondary schools (DfES, 2001c) and the HE sector (Hodge, 2001). However, it was also apparent that the rankings, which individuals assigned to themselves and their friends, were not always consistent with the grades that the young people reported having attained. In common with other empirical studies of processes of selection and stratification in schools and colleges (Ball, 1981; Gillborn and Youdell, 2001; Hargreaves, 1967; Troyna, 1991), it appears that perceptions of ability were strongly influenced by other (social) factors.

### *Cultural capital*

Throughout the interviews, both Lucy and Liz played down their academic ability. In the first interview, for example, Lucy explained that she had not given university much thought 'cos when you're little you always have the idea that it's for clever people', clearly indicating that she did not see herself as a 'clever' person. She also compared herself unfavourably with her close friends at several points during the research, and frequently expressed surprise at the high level of her own test scores, predicted grades and mock results. Moreover, the ranking that she had constructed, based on these comparisons, diverged considerably from the actual A Level results she and her friends obtained. Liz seemed to hold a similar view of her own ability relative to others over the two years of the study, firmly believing that, 'Most of my friends are actually brainier than me' (Interview 2).

Although the interviews provide no conclusive proof about why Lucy and Liz perceived their academic ability to be lower than many of their friends and peers when the grades that they obtained suggested otherwise, it seems likely that the assumptions and experience of their families may have played a significant role. Both young women described how their family knew very little about the education system and in neither case did their parents or step-parents assume that they would go on to university. Indeed, both felt that their parents/step-parents would be as happy for them to get a job on leaving Emily Davies College as to go on

to HE.

As discussed in Chapter Four, Liz was the only young person in the sample from social class V. The differences between her and most of the other young people illustrate well some of the class-based distinctions which have been highlighted by others, such as a lack of confidence in her own academic ability and of certainty about her educational trajectory (Reay, 1998b; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). Lucy's social class (II – a classification shared by many of the other young people) would suggest that her apparent lack of self-confidence and sense of academic inferiority relative to peers cannot be explained in the same way. However, neither were her feelings similar to those of the middle class young women in Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) study who were constantly anxious about 'not being good enough' as a result of high familial expectations of academic success. Despite their different SES classification, Liz and Lucy's descriptions of their parents'/step-parents' attitudes to education, knowledge of the education system and level of involvement in their decisions were extremely similar and seem to have affected the extent to which they identified themselves as 'clever' and 'academic' young people. The amount of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) on which they were able to draw was considerably less than for many of the other young people in the study – apparently explained by Liz's SES background and the low level of educational qualification obtained by Lucy's parents. These and other social processes, which appear to cut across simple social class classifications, are taken up again in section 5.3.3, below.

### *Degrees of difference*

The relationship between academic attainment and rank relative to peers was also distorted by the very process of making constant comparisons with others. In Charlotte and Zoë's friendship group, for example, the difference in grades obtained by Charlotte, Zoë and their friend Sinead (in GCSEs, A Level modules and final A Level exams) was small – particularly when compared with the range of attainment across the college as a whole<sup>9</sup>. However, throughout the two years, because of the highly competitive nature of the group and the way in which the young women constantly compared their results, Charlotte was acutely aware that Zoë was achieving slightly higher grades than she was. Thus, although

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<sup>9</sup> At Emily Davies College, the mean A Level point score per student for exams taken in 2001 was 16 – equivalent to CCD (DfES, 2001b). This compares to a score of 28 for Charlotte and Sinead (AAB), and 36 for Zoë (AABB).

Charlotte continued to define herself as a 'high achiever' during her time at college, the small differences between the friends became highly significant for her (and possibly also for Zoë and Sinead). They affected how she positioned herself academically (frequently comparing herself, unfavourably, with Zoë) and, consequently, the choices that she made about higher education. These are discussed in greater detail, below.

In many ways, the exaggerated sense of difference apparent amongst this group of friends reflects Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) discussion of the 'production of excellence' by the young women in their longitudinal study. They argue that 'the middle class girls' lives had been rigidly circumscribed by expectations of academic success, often to such an extent that quite outstanding performances were only ever viewed as average and ordinary' (p.179) and they attribute this circumscription to the school the young women attended, in which very high achievement was the norm. However, the research at Emily Davies College suggests that equally strong norms can be established within friendship groups – even when they are located within a more disparate institutional culture (see section 5.3.3, below), which does not necessarily understand high performance as routine.

#### *The development of 'myths'*

I have argued above that not all the young people involved in the research viewed ability as 'fixed'. Indeed, several respondents were acutely aware of what they perceived to be changes to their own 'ability' during their time at Emily Davies College and, thus, their academic standing relative to peers. Nevertheless, there were others who subscribed much more closely to a 'fixed' view of ability and, in some cases, these young people seemed quite unaware of the actual grades that their friends had obtained. This is illustrated well by Juliet, a close friend of Clare and a more distant friend of Becky. Throughout the interviews, both Clare and Becky talked about her in similar terms, using phrases such as: 'She's always been a bit of a genius!' (Becky, Interview 2), 'She's a child prodigy!' (Becky, Interview 4) and 'I think it's just been generally accepted "Juliet's really brainy. She'll get an offer from Oxford"' (Clare, Interview 4). However, on few occasions did they refer to the actual grades she had obtained and it was clear that their view of her 'ability' was firmly rooted in comparisons that had been made early on in secondary school. Despite the excellent grades that Becky obtained throughout her time at college, she continued to perceive Juliet's ability as superior to her own, thus suggesting a further way in which 'rankings' were not always consistent with actual 'attainment'.

*'Effortless achievement'*

In his research into the construction of masculinities in a secondary school, Mac an Ghaill (1994) describes how the middle class and academically-able group of young men in his study, the 'Real Englishmen', viewed with disdain the efforts and diligence of the upwardly mobile, working class 'Academic Achievers'. This is a good example of Bourdieu's (1976) claim that, for those who have prior advantage, 'application becomes pedantry and a respect for hard work grinding, limited pettiness, with an implication that it is intended to compensate for a lack of natural talents' (p.114). At Emily Davies College, it appeared that similar types of judgement (for example, about 'effortless achievement', 'natural intelligence' and 'understanding things the first time') further distorted the supposed relationship between ranking relative to peers and attainment. In several cases, the ranking of high attaining individuals seemed to be lowered a little by a recognition that they worked extremely hard to achieve their results.

Zoë: I mean like some people...like Alison has the ability to do amazingly all the time but then I don't know how much study she does at home or anything like that. (Interview 6)

Steve: Joe's been the kind of...I wouldn't say he's more intelligent, I think he's got more of a work ethic than me and Ben. (Interview 4)

While for others, an assumption of 'natural ability' augmented the rank that others assigned to them:

Zoë: I think Rose and Amy going to Oxford to do chemistry is perfect because they are both so clever and I think they will fit Oxford....I think they'll do really well there because they tend to sort of, they do the work and get it done. *They do it the first time and get it the first time.* (Interview 6)

With respect to judgements about 'effortless achievement', there were few gender differences amongst the Emily Davies students: it was viewed positively by both the young men and the young women. Furthermore, unlike Mac an Ghaill's study, such judgements did not seem to be related to any specific class positions.

### *A meritocracy?*

On the basis of this evidence, it would appear that the rankings the young people came up with and their sense of their own standing relative to peers were not necessarily consistent with the grades they had obtained and/or those that they were predicted to obtain. Indeed, the distortions to the supposed relationship between actual academic attainment (as measured by test and exam results<sup>10</sup>) and 'rank' suggest that it is unwise to treat the 'hierarchy of students' as a meritocracy. This reflects the findings of others, such as Gillborn and Youdell (2001) who have argued that "‘ability’ is constituted in ways that provide for the systematic disadvantaging of particular socially defined groups' (p.65). Some of the Emily Davies students were disadvantaged because of a relative lack of cultural capital within their families, while others were disadvantaged because of the extreme degree of competitiveness upon which their friendship group seemed predicated (for example, within Zoë and Charlotte's group, the constant competition between the friends had the effect of rendering Charlotte's performance, which was very high compared to attainment levels over the college as a whole, as quite ordinary).

The evidence presented in this section also demonstrates clearly the important role that friends played in constructing an individual's sense of 'ability' and position relative to peers. Although these influences were invariably exerted subtly and were rarely recognised by the young people themselves, they had a considerable impact on decisions made about higher education. These are explored in more detail in section 5.4, below.

## **5.3 Hierarchies of institutions and courses**

### **5.3.1 Constructing institutional hierarchies**

Several empirical studies of higher education choice have demonstrated the distinctions between institutions that are made by both students and employers. As discussed in Chapter Two, these distinctions have been interpreted largely as a result of the mass expansion of the

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<sup>10</sup> The extent to which exam results are a good indication of 'ability' and/or 'intelligence' is also the subject of considerable debate. For example, Gipps and Murphy (1994) argue that our definitions of achievement are built into the assumptions we make about tests and testing. Thus, changes to the structure and content of tests can change the pattern of results. Similarly, cultural reproduction theorists would maintain that exams embody the specific cultural perspectives of dominant groups in society and thus discriminate against other groups that do not have access to the same cultural resources. However, the purpose of the present analysis was to investigate the validity of the young people's accounts: the extent to which the rankings they formed, allegedly on the basis on differential attainment, reflected the actual grades the young people had achieved.

sector and the supposed need for the middle classes to find new ways of ensuring the reproduction of their class advantage (Ainley, 1994; Brown and Scase, 1994). Indeed, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) claim that while the expansion of HE has led to a greater standardisation of experience, it has resulted in a concomitant process of diversification and a polarisation between old and new universities. Reay (1998a) and Ball *et al.* (2001) argue, however, that not all young people are equally aware of the distinctions between institutions and suggest that ‘hot knowledge’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998) about specific universities or groups of HEIs is not accessible to all social groups. Although the young people involved in this study were from broadly similar social backgrounds (in terms of parental occupation, level of parental education, type of housing and secondary school attended), they differed considerably in their knowledge of and engagement with the higher education market. By the time they came to complete their UCAS forms, most of the young people had some idea of the reputations of the universities they were applying to, as well as those of some other institutions. However, across the sample as a whole, not all the young people constructed identical types of hierarchy, nor did they attach the same importance to attending a ‘highly ranked’ institution. On the basis of these differences it is possible to identify four main approaches to issues of institutional status and reputation.

#### *The ‘highly assured’ league tablers*

Becky, Paul, Simon and Steve all constructed a detailed and conventional ‘league table’ hierarchy. These students not only favoured ‘old’ universities over ‘new’, but were also aware of more subtle distinctions in reputation between the institutions in the two categories. Although not all four students had actually made use of published league tables, several were acutely aware of the relative positions of the different institutions and were able to quote the places of particular HEIs during interviews. The young people in this group had typically been aware of differences within the HE market at the time of their first interview and all attached great importance to attending a ‘high status’ university. Indeed, Steve was even prepared to choose a course he was less keen on if it meant he could get into a prestigious university. He summed up his dilemma in this way:

The main issue is whether to do law, straight law, at a lesser university or do, I don’t know, politics or theology or something along those lines at, I don’t know, something that’s considered a better institution. That’s basically the main [thing] I’ve got to sort out in my mind. (Interview 3)



Steve and Simon explained the importance they attached to status in largely vocational terms, believing that attending a high status university increased their chances of getting a good job. Becky and Paul also mentioned this but put more emphasis on being surrounded by ‘like-minded people’.

*The ‘less assured’ league tablers*

Jim, Liz and Sunita were all aware of status differences between institutions but differed from the young people discussed above in their relative lack of confidence at ‘reading’ the market. For example, throughout her two years at Emily Davies College, Sunita had emphasised the importance of securing a place at a ‘top 30’ institution:

- Sunita: I think the first 30 are OK. Below that it’s a bit pointless actually.
- Rachel: Why do you say that?
- Sunita: Because if you get really low grades at A Level it’s silly going to university – because you got low grades you go to a low university and get a low degree so you might as well do something else: some training or a work placement somewhere.
- Rachel: [...] It’s just the top 30 that you’re considering?
- Sunita: Yes, cos I think too much below that is like, you know, kind of, it’s not bad but it’s pointless in my view. (Interview 3)

However, her knowledge of the relative status of HEIs was based solely upon university league tables published in newspapers. She talked about the difficulty of interpreting this information when certain places (like Swansea, where she eventually secured a place) appeared in the top 30 in some tables but in lower positions in others. This was particularly apparent during the last interview when she described her difficulty about deciding which institutions to contact during clearing:

... You see it in league tables in the newspaper – it was like 44 in one of them and I was like ‘Is this right or not?’ I was feeling a bit kind of like let down and then I looked at another one and it was in the top 30. They go up and down and you feel like, ‘Have I gone to a high university or [not]?’ You look at some universities and they are high in some of them [newspaper league tables] and then it’s like lower in other ones and you’re like ‘Which one is right?’ You can’t trust them. (Interview 6)

Her obvious confusion and lack of confidence at reading the market contrasts markedly with her more assured peers, discussed above, none of whom ever spoke about any ambiguity in an institution's status.

### *The vocationalists*

A third group of students (Clare and Lucy) also ranked institutions in a hierarchical way but, for them, their judgements were based on a range of 'vocational' considerations such as the advertised rate of graduate employment and links with local employers. The language these young people used to differentiate between HEIs reflected this perspective, often contrasting 'academic' universities unfavourably with their 'vocational' counterparts. Clare and Lucy differed from the 'league tablers' in several other important respects. First, the hierarchies of HEIs that they constructed were much more geographically limited than those of the young people discussed above. They were aware of the differences in reputations of local HEIs but claimed they had little idea of the relative status of universities outside of the south of England. Second, in contrast to many of their peers, Clare and Lucy knew relatively little about the higher education system generally at the time of the first interview. Indeed, Lucy thought that it was possible only to study a very limited range of subjects at university:

I thought university was really English, science, maths. I don't know if there are any other courses. I don't know what you actually do at university. I don't know if you get a degree or what. (Interview 1)

### *The unaware*

Finally, four young people (Charlotte, Mark, Sarah and Zoë) claimed that they were unaware of the relative status of HEIs. In Sarah's case this was because she had made a conscious decision not to find out about such differences. She was aware that not all universities had the same reputation but explained how her past experiences of choosing a secondary school and sixth-form college had taught her to disregard reputation:

Rachel:        And what about the overall reputation of the university? Was that a consideration at all?

Sarah:        ....Not really....cos, I mean, well our school...was like supposed to have a really good reputation but it wasn't really that good....and when I came here [Emily Davies College] people said it had quite a bad

reputation compared to [another local college] but I find it's quite good really. So I don't go on reputations. (Interview 4)

However, no other student had made a conscious effort to ignore or reject such labels.

Zoë and Charlotte both claimed that they were not aware of any differences in the status of universities and colleges – at least until after they had sent off their UCAS forms. They were not unaware of all hierarchies, however. Both seemed to have substituted a subject-based hierarchy for one that was institutionally-focussed. Both had applied for high status courses (medicine and law, respectively) and during the interviews emphasised the status of their planned career rather than the place at which they would study. Nevertheless, both did show some interest in Oxbridge: they attended an initial meeting for interested students in the college and Zoë then went on the college-organised visit to Oxford.

### **5.3.2 Constructing subject hierarchies**

While much of the literature about HE choice has focussed on perceptions of institutional status (Ainley, 1994; Ball *et al.*, 2002; Brown and Scase, 1994; Reay *et al.*, 2001b), relatively little has been written about the way in which hierarchies of degree subjects are constructed or the ways in which such hierarchies intersect with perceptions of institutional status.

However, the research at Emily Davies College suggests that the status that young people assigned to particular subject areas affected not only their own choice of subject, but also the institutions to which they applied. In some cases, at least, the young people engaged in an intricate balancing act in an attempt to maximise the status of both institution and subject.

Although Zoë and Charlotte were relatively unaware of the reputation of HEIs (at least until after they had applied), the status of subjects was of great importance to them and they both had developed a detailed hierarchy of degree subjects. Charlotte explained that: 'I guess I kind of went for something that...almost people expect you to do if you get good grades – it's either that [law] or medicine' (Interview 6). Paul and Steve, both of whom ranked law particularly highly, also shared such views. For these young people, the high status that they attached to these courses was in part derived from the status of the careers with which they are associated. This was not necessarily the case for all the young people, however: for some, status seemed to be related to the perceived difficulty of the course. For example, Sarah believed that two of her friends who had both gained places to study for a joint degree

in law and French (at Cambridge and Exeter) had been motivated by an acute awareness of subject status. She felt that they had chosen what they, and others in their friendship group, considered to be ‘very hard, high status courses’ (Interview 6) – primarily to emphasise their academic ability. However, she claimed that as the beginning of the university term had drawn nearer and they had found out more about what they would be required to study, they had started to question their choices.

For others, status differences were related to the extent to which the course was seen to be ‘vocational’ or ‘applied’. Simon valued courses such as history and politics above more applied ones, because he felt they provided a ‘better all-round education’ and kept his career options open:

I’m not very keen on all this vocational malarkey....I mean, a lot of the vocational courses they do are set towards one thing so if you don’t like that then you don’t have a lot of freedom after that. Whereas...when I finish university with a degree in history and politics I’ll have a bit of freedom to do what I want...whereas if I’d done a vocational course I’d be set on what I’d have to do. (Interview 6)

Several other students (including Paul and Steve) commented disparagingly about specific applied courses. In contrast, for Clare, Lucy and Sunita, the highest status courses were those that were most closely tied to a particular employment sector, offered work experience or placements, and had high rates of graduate employment.

The methods by which the young people ranked courses had much in common with their hierarchical categorisation of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the way in which these various subject hierarchies intersected with considerations of university status differed amongst the young people. Some prioritised the hierarchy of courses over that of institutions (Charlotte, Zoë), others were more concerned to ensure that they went to the highest status institution possible (Becky, Simon, Sunita) and, although Steve resolved his dilemma (outlined in 5.3.1, above) by compromising on his choice of course (choosing East European studies instead of law) to ensure that he could get into a ‘higher status’ university (UCL), the status of both remained important to him.

### 5.3.3 Explaining the hierarchies

#### *The role of the family*

Although the hierarchical positioning of friends and peers was highly dependent on conversations with and observations of other young people, friends were less important in the construction of institutional and course hierarchies. Instead, young people's parents and step-parents played a pivotal role in informing their attitudes to higher education. As outlined in Chapter Four, in very few cases were there any obvious disparities between a young person's perception of, for example, the purpose of HE or a particular institution or course, and what they reported of their parents' views. A close correspondence was evident throughout. All those who were most concerned to attend a high status institution (Becky, Paul, Simon, Steve and Sunita) described how their parents also attached considerable importance to institutional reputation. For example:

Simon: I think my dad's quite keen on me applying to Oxford or LSE....

Rachel: What's he said to you about Oxford and LSE?

Simon: Well, obviously that Oxford is far superior to any other university, the stature of it.....and the same about LSE. (Interview 2)

Steve: He [father] would prefer it if I went to an old university, preferably somewhere with stringent requirements to get in, mainly as he sees it as the best way to get on. (Interview 2)

And, as would be expected, none of those who were unaware of differences in institutional reputation indicated that their parents or step-parents recognised any such differences.

In terms of conventional indicators of social class, it is hard to find any significant differences between most of the young people who took part of the research (with the exception of Liz and Lucy): they had attended similar secondary schools and lived in similar types of housing. Moreover, their parents and/or step-parents were employed in similar types of job and few had been to university themselves. However, as outlined in Chapter Four, there were considerable differences in the extent to which families were involved in the decision-making process and in their knowledge about HE, generally, and the relative status of institutions, more specifically.

It is possible that a more detailed comparison between the families of the young people may help to explain some of the differences. Although the classification of parental occupations in terms of the Registrar-General's categories did not differ greatly, a finer-grained analysis of the contexts in which the young people's parents worked provides a possible explanation of why some parents were sensitive to institutional and subject status and others were not. For example, the fathers of Simon and Steve both came into contact with colleagues who had been to university and, as a result, had come to believe that not all institutions carried equal value in the workplace:

Steve: My dad tells me about people at work. Cos he's like half way up, but at [oil refinery company] all the top brass are like from Oxford and he reckons people from Oxford run the show and they kind of set out what they think they should be, and then people from lesser universities actually work out how to do it, and then people who haven't been to university actually have to do it. (Interview 6)

Rachel: So where do you think he [father] has got his information about the importance of reputation from?

Simon: Probably from work and stuff. He says all these upstarts are always coming in and taking people's jobs.

Rachel: Does he have a role in choosing graduates?

Simon: Yeah. Well, he employs them and sacks them. (Interview 4)

This distinguished them from the parents of other young people in the sample, whose workplaces had not provided them with similar opportunities for gauging the status attached to particular HE courses and institutions. For example, Mark was located in the same social class (II) as Simon and Steve – but claimed that his parents had no desire for him to apply to any particular institution. His mother was a teacher at a primary school and his father was a salesman and, from Mark's accounts, it seems that neither parent had had much exposure to conversations about HE within their place of work. This suggests that a similar social class classification may mask considerable disparities between parents in their first-hand knowledge of the nature and impact of higher education hierarchies.

A second possible explanation for the differences between the young people may lie in their

previous educational experiences and, in particular, the extent to which they had identified themselves as ‘high achievers’ (or been identified as such by others) at an early age. The families of both Becky and Zoë had a clear sense of higher education hierarchies – in Becky’s case, in terms of institutional status and, in Zoë’s, in terms of the status attached to specific degree subjects. However, neither sets of parents had been to university themselves, and neither Becky nor Zoë mentioned that their parents had gained their views about hierarchies from the workplace. Instead, their narratives suggest that, as Becky and Zoë had both been certain that they would go on to university from a young age (and their teachers at school had confirmed this likely destination), their parents had had both the time and motivation to find out more about the higher education sector and what a ‘high achiever’ could hope to achieve. For example, Zoë described how her teachers had informed her and her parents of what she would have to do to maximise her chances of getting into medical school (such as gaining relevant work experience and shadowing doctors) when she was choosing her options at school. It appeared that her parents had then assumed responsibility for these extra-curricular activities: ‘They gave me a nudge and said, “You’ve got to get on with this”’ (Interview 2).

There may well be further explanations that help to explain the differences in knowledge of, and attitude to, higher education hierarchies between the families of the young people involved in this research. However, the two suggestions above go some way to deconstructing what is often assumed to be the homogeneity of the middle class. For example, Walkerdine *et al.* (2001) argue that the transition to HE is qualitatively different for young women from working class families and their middle class peers. They claim that for the middle classes: ‘what is aimed at by children is becoming like their parents in the sense of having the same kind of career as them, the same levels of income, material comfort and lifestyle’, while ‘for working class daughters the message is quite different; it is clearly about *not* becoming like them and it is this which is central both to the daughters’ drive towards higher education and to the deep ambivalences that beset some of them concerning the same’ (p.158). The evidence from the Emily Davies students would suggest, however, that this is an over-simplification of highly complex class differences. The narratives of the largely lower middle class students in this research do not resonate with Walkerdine *et al.*’s description of middle class assumptions and motivations. Far from wanting to emulate their parents, most of the young people at Emily Davies College ‘wanted something different’ – articulated particularly clearly by many of the young women when talking about their



mothers:

Charlotte: At the moment she [mother] is a secretary in a school. She did a typing course and worked abroad but she didn't go on to university.....I definitely don't want to do what my mum does. (Interview 2)

Zoë: My mum was very pressured into what she wanted to do. They were like, my grandparents, 'You have to be a secretary' – so that's what she did. (Interview 2)

Becky: I mean she was a really bright student at school herself but she never did that well in the end in their Year 11s [O Levels]. And she never went on any further because she couldn't do it. So now that I can go somewhere she really wants me to go as far as I can. I think that's what it is. (Interview 4)

Furthermore, the 'feelings of guilt' that Walkerdine *et al.* discuss in relation to the HE choices of working class young women were equally evident amongst the young women (and some of the young men) at Emily Davies College. This suggests that the process of HE choice amongst the middle class is more complex and highly differentiated than Walkerdine *et al.* claim and that the experience of some young people from lower middle class backgrounds, with no family history of HE, may have more in common with the working class young people in Walkerdine *et al.*'s sample than with other fractions of the middle class. Their assertion that: 'middle class children receive the message from birth that not only are they able and clever, but also that their destiny is to go to university and become professionals' (p.162) is consonant with the experiences of only one or two of the Emily Davies students.

Various studies of educational choice (Gerwitz *et al.*, 1995; Lauder and Hughes, 1999; Reay, 1998b) have outlined what have been called the 'class strategies' of middle class parents: attempts 'to achieve a *class fit* between the habitus of home and institution and avoid social mixing' (Ball and Vincent, 2001, p.186). However, the research at Emily Davies College illustrates the significant diversity in the approaches of parents from a similar (middle) class location and the distinct lack of 'strategic-ness' on the part of some. As such, it may help to



fill what Power (2001) describes as the ‘empirical gap which has grown ever more glaring as the number of people deemed to be “middle class” grows and as the conventional indicators of success and failure shift upwards and become harder to define’ (196-197).

### *The role of the college*

Several studies of HE choice have highlighted the role played by school and colleges (Roberts and Allen, 1997; Roker, 1993; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). Indeed, Reay *et al.* (2001a) argue that schools constitute an intervening variable in HE choice: ‘higher education applicants are located within a matrix of influences which are best represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution’ (para. 1.6). In contrast to many of the schools and colleges in Reay *et al.*’s research, Emily Davies College had a fairly weak and disparate institutional culture in terms of the messages that were conveyed about higher education. Further, in some cases, these messages were clearly contradictory. For example, while Oxbridge candidates were, in many ways, privileged within the college (they were the only group of students who received collective advice about their applications and for whom the college organised visits), one of the college careers advisers explained that she encouraged both students and parents to ignore issues of status:

Adviser: We wouldn’t recommend something, we wouldn’t say...all courses are...in my view every course is going to give you a degree, you know....I say to them, ‘Your CV will just say, you know, 10 GCSEs, 3 A Levels, BSc Honours. They’ll just be interested in what job you’ve been doing and what you can do for this company’. So, you know, try to get them to see much further on.

Rachel: So if they come with an awareness of status differences between universities, what do you say to them?

Adviser: I say, ‘Why aren’t you at Eton doing your A Levels? Will Prince William’s grades be any better than yours because he went to Eton and you’re at the local college?’ You know, get them to...make it quite personal and get them to reflect back. You know, say that a degree’s a degree and an A Level grade’s a grade....I think a lot of those perceptions must come from the home – just the whole way you’re conditioned and socialised and led to believe that this is the best....So it is just challenging that and saying: ‘Do you believe that?’

The messages that emanated from teachers were similarly mixed. Some gave no advice about applications ('I suppose teachers don't really want to prejudice it too much in case they put their foot in it, saying "Oh, this is a really rubbish university," and you say "Oh, I'm putting that down!"' Clare, Interview 4), while others made specific recommendations to students. For example, Liz's law teacher told her that, instead of the universities she had been considering, such as Portsmouth and Middlesex, she should aim to get into a higher status institution, which was more in line with her predicted grades.

These various messages about status were reflected in the college's historical patterns of HE entry (see Appendix 1): although HEIs in the south and west of the UK were much more popular than institutions in other areas of the country, there was considerable diversity in the 'types' of institutions at which students had secured places; both 'old' and 'new' universities consistently appeared in the college's annual list of 'top ten' higher education destinations. This fairly disparate organisational culture and the large size of the student body<sup>11</sup> go some way to explaining why there was little evidence of an institutional effect on the young people's choices. Indeed, the considerable differences between friendship groups, discussed below, are perhaps further evidence of the limited role of the college in influencing the HE choices of its students.

### *The role of friends*

Although the role of friends and peers has been explored in a small number of other studies of higher education choice, it has generally been understood as a means through which institutional and familial habitus is played out (Bourdieu, 1976; Roker, 1993). However, at Emily Davies College, perhaps because of the weaker and more disparate institutional culture, there was more evidence of significant differences between friendship groups in their approaches to the status of HE institutions and courses. These differences are illustrated well by the groups' different responses to two institutions, local to the sixth-form college: the universities of Bournemouth and Portsmouth. They were viewed very positively by some groups of friends. Within other groups, however, both institutions were assigned a particularly low status:

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<sup>11</sup> At Emily Davies College there were between 800 and 900 students in each year group. Between 1996 and 2000, the percentage of each year group going on to HE ranged from 63 per cent to 75 per cent.

Rachel: Are there some places that are more popular amongst your friends than some others?

Lucy: Yeah....well, I don't know much but I know that like Bournemouth is good and like Bath and Bristol and places like that. (Interview 3)

Steve: One [of my friends] mentioned Bournemouth. I don't know why but the consensus of opinion said it was a bad idea so...whatever...I think it was Mark who said it. I don't know what he's planning to do now but I'm not sure he's too keen on Bournemouth any more!  
(Interview 2)

There was a similar diversity in the groups' approaches to the status of degree subjects. Media studies, for example, was very popular and seen as a 'good choice' within Lucy's group, whereas Paul and his friends held a markedly different view.

Such differences do not necessarily constitute evidence of the influence of friends and peers. Indeed, the differences outlined above are clearly in line with the young people's parents' knowledge of and attitude to institutional and subject status. Thus, the young people within these friendship groups could merely be making similar choices to one another. Previous research has highlighted the ways in which friendship groups are often predicated upon a similar social class location (Hey, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994) and, given the close relationships between familial assumptions and attitudes to status, discussed above, it is perhaps unsurprising that in some cases friends subscribed to very similar views of particular universities and courses.

In Chapter Four I argued that differences in academic attainment and likely HE destination played an important role in effectively foreclosing HE-related conversations between friends. However, it is also apparent that strong peer group norms did, in some cases, have a more direct impact on an individual's view of a university or course's reputation. For example, both Paul and Charlotte described the ways in which their friends had influenced their own thinking – although, for Charlotte, this was only after she had made her application:

Paul: She [friend from subject class] influenced it a bit because....I had Cardiff as my first choice and we discussed the differences between

Southampton and Cardiff and so she did influence it a bit or she probably persuaded me that Southampton was the best place to go.  
(Interview 6)

Rachel: And you put UWE [University of the West of England] as your insurance?

Charlotte: Yeah....It was a really bad choice I think cos it's not a very good university....and I decided if I got my second choice then I'd decline it and then, I don't know if you can go through clearing if you do that, maybe take a year out and go through it again. But I was not going to take it at all. I was like 'No!'

Rachel: Why's that? Didn't you go to the open day?

Charlotte: Yeah. I did. And it seemed really nice and it had really good facilities and everything. It's just, I guess, the whole reputation of it. It's like an old polytechnic and someone said to me in passing, 'It's not a very good university' and I was like, 'Yeah...mmmm.'

Rachel: So when did you decide that if you didn't get the grades for your first choice you'd reject it? Was that fairly recently?

Charlotte: That was on holiday. I was discussing it...cos all my friends there were my age and we were discussing all the universities we were hoping to go to and we were discussing our second choices and someone actually went: 'Oh no – there's a couple of universities I would never pick.' So I listened and UWE was right there and I thought, 'Yeah...' (Interview 6)

However, such examples were extremely rare. Due to the differences between friends, the assumed significance of these differences, and the resulting difficulty of discussing HE choices, opportunities for directly influencing friends in this way were very restricted. Friends and peers were of central importance in determining one's 'position' relative to others and thus (as will be demonstrated below) in locating one's place on the emerging HE hierarchies. However, in terms of constructing hierarchies of HE institutions and courses, the absence of discussion about HE-related topics ensured that friends rarely played more than a confirmatory role.

## 5.4 Determining places on hierarchies – the process of ‘mapping’

For the majority of the young people who were involved in the research, both sets of hierarchies were crucial to the process of HE choice. Their own position, relative to their friends and peers, was ‘mapped’ onto the hierarchy of HE courses and institutions that they had constructed; this helped them to decide what, for them, constituted a ‘feasible’ choice.

### 5.4.1 Subject choices

As would, perhaps, be expected from the way in which the young people constructed their HE hierarchies and, in particular, the importance they assigned to the status of subjects vis-à-vis that of institutions, the impact of peer hierarchies on subject choice was most significant for Zoë and Charlotte. Several of the friends that Zoë had made during her time at Emily Davies College had applied to read medicine at university and, as discussed above, Zoë felt that for some of them, their choices had been driven by a desire to emphasise their position at the top of what they perceived to be the academic hierarchy within their friendship group, irrespective of their actual interest in the subject. She reflected on the decision of her friend, Gillian, to do medicine in the following way:

I don’t know....maybe she was doing medicine because – this will sound quite big-headed now – but because you have to be quite clever to do it. I don’t know whether she’s immensely suited for it. (Interview 6)

Similarly, Sarah suspected that some of her friends’ HE choices had been motivated by similar concerns: to emphasise their academic standing relative to others. (However, Sarah’s friends differed from Zoë’s in their definition of ‘high status’ subjects, favouring what they perceived to be intrinsically difficult subjects like law and French, rather than medicine.)

Charlotte’s HE choices can also be seen as highly dependent on the way in which she transposed her ‘rank’ relative to her friends onto the hierarchy of degree subjects that she had constructed. I have argued in section 5.2.2 that the constant comparisons made by Charlotte and her friends had the effect of distorting their perception of their own academic ability (at least, compared to the actual results that the young women obtained). The great significance that was attached to relatively small differences in performance seemed to convince Charlotte that she was not ‘clever enough’ to read medicine (despite a strong and clearly expressed

desire to study the subject when she began at Emily Davies College). Throughout the two years of their A Level studies, Zoë had identified strongly with becoming a doctor and, as Charlotte's grades were not quite as high as Zoë's, Charlotte seemed to assume that she was not as suited to a medical career as her friend. She thus chose to read law – a subject in keeping with her view of herself as part of a 'high achieving' friendship group, but one which also reflected her perception of her 'inferior' level of achievement when compared to Zoë. This interpretation of Charlotte's motivation for changing her career ambitions is supported by the language she used throughout her time at college: talking about Zoë's 'amazing grades' (Interview 6), when the actual difference between their A Level results was relatively small; and characterising her university choices as 'Well, Zoë's off to Oxford' (Interview 3), when Zoë had actually decided against even applying to this university. Her own explanation of her decision not to apply to medical school was couched in academic terms – a belief that she was 'not bright enough' to gain the necessary grades. However, when deliberating over her decision, she had been assured by her chemistry teacher that her A Level grades would be more than adequate to gain entry to medical school. Despite this reassurance and her own high level of motivation to become a doctor, she decided not to apply for medicine.

#### **5.4.2 Institutional choices**

##### *Distance from those 'above'*

Across the sample as a whole, the process of mapping was most apparent in decisions about institutions. Both Liz and Jim made a positive choice to apply to what they considered to be lower status institutions, primarily because of their beliefs about their own 'ability' relative to others. Despite advice from one of her teachers that she should apply to a university asking for A and B grades, Liz explained that:

Liz: I'd love to go to a low status college and feel one of the best instead of going to a high one and feeling really stupid. (Interview 3)

Jim described his preferences in a similar way:

Jim: Even if my target grades went up to all Cs, I wouldn't want to go somewhere like Southampton cos I'm not that intelligent and they're all like intelligent people that go to all the traditional ones and I would rather keep away from them.

Rachel: Why's that?

Jim: I don't know. I'd always feel like lower than them. I'd rather be with people of my own sort of level. (Interview 3)

Thus, he felt that even if his actual attainment was as high as that of other students, his ability or 'intelligence' would remain lower.

From these quotations, it is apparent that the HE decisions of both Liz and Jim were highly dependent on the way in which they perceived their academic ability relative to others. Both seemed to have a fixed and deeply embedded sense of their own 'ability', which was not amenable to change either as a result of an increase in their actual level of attainment or encouragement and reassurance from teachers. Neither Jim nor Liz rejected 'higher status' HE institutions on grounds of social discomfort (in contrast to many of the respondents in Reay *et al.*'s (2001b) research), but because of the way in which they positioned themselves academically – beneath many of their peers. Nevertheless, as I have argued above (in section 5.2.2), Liz's sense of academic inferiority relative to others and the mismatch between her own perception of her academic ability and the actual grades she received seem to be explained by her social position and, in particular, her relative lack of cultural capital.

#### *Distance from those 'below'*

Becky also attempted to match her 'rank' with what she perceived to be an appropriate HEI. However, in contrast to the young people discussed above, she was concerned to identify high status institutions, requiring high A Level grades. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, Becky was acutely aware of her own position relative to the other members of her friendship group – a position which had been underlined by the comments of one of her teachers. She wanted to attend a university with other young people who had achieved similarly high grades:

Rachel: You've mentioned high entry requirements a few times. Is that something that's very important to you in deciding where to apply?

Becky: Yeah, cos I think that if they've got such high entry requirements it shows that they are, you know, they've got high standards and I think it's just a reflection on sort of the teaching, and what the other students will be like. Everyone will be motivated towards working. It won't be

like at school and college where everyone's across such a wide spectrum of ability that um...if you do work really hard it makes you stand out so much from everybody else. It makes you different from everybody else. I want to go somewhere where everyone is under the same sort of pressure and everyone does the same amount of work and everyone has the same mentality about doing their work. (Interview 3)

Even for self-identified (and apparently self-assured) high achievers like Becky, comparisons with others were of considerable importance when refining their university choices. For example, both Becky and Paul described how reassured they had felt at seeing others at the college's meeting for potential Oxbridge candidates whom they considered to be 'less able' than them.

- Paul: There were some people, I was quite surprised that they were there. That sounds really bad doesn't it?.....I see them in the class and think, 'You must know that, how do you not know that?' Things like that. But they might surprise us all. They might surprise me.
- Rachel: So seeing people there like that, did it affect how you felt about applying to Oxford?
- Paul: Yeah, it definitely did. It gave me more confidence.  
(Interview 2)

### *Intermediate positions*

In contrast to Becky, Jim and Liz, most of the other young people in the research reached their decision about what constituted a feasible application for them by differentiating themselves from others both above and below them on the 'hierarchy of ability'. Steve's mapping process was typical of many:

I would imagine that you're looking at, with Joe, the top band of universities, then you're looking at like myself and Ben, you're looking at maybe a bit lower, but still good standard universities. It's a bit like a cascade, a waterfall down towards...I think Marco, who's doing the GNVQ.... Yeah, I would imagine some of us will be going to different types of university entirely. (Interview 2)



Several of the young people did not restrict themselves to mapping their own position onto these higher education hierarchies. Indeed, many were also clear about where they would locate their friends. In the extract above, for example, Steve made an explicit link between the ranking of individuals within his friendship group and the HEI to which he thought they would be likely to get in. He continued to make such comparisons throughout the two years of the research, even when his friends were about to begin their university courses:

I think Mark might have made a bit of a mistake going to Brunel cos I've a feeling.....he's going there to do American Studies...but I believe he got about the same [A Level grades] as me and...I'm sure he could have got somewhere a bit better than that to do American Studies cos that's like an engineering university – that's what it specialises in. (Interview 6)

### *Contingent positions*

As discussed previously, in some cases comparisons with peers led to changes in self-perception over the course of the research, with direct consequences for higher education decisions. Paul's HE choices exemplify such shifting perceptions, and the contingent nature of his positioning on the HE hierarchy, quite clearly. As discussed above, on entry to Emily Davies College he felt that his grades 'were not particularly good, they were top average, I'd say' (Interview 1). He also described how one of his school friends was hoping to gain a place at Cambridge and reflected that, 'I'm sure he's capable of it. He's much more intelligent than me' (Interview 1). However, after comparing his GCSE grades and performance in his A Level subjects with others at college, he seemed to revise his sense of his own academic position relative to others, and his mapping onto the HE hierarchy changed accordingly. By the second interview, he was seriously considering applying to Oxford: he had attended one of the meetings the college had organised for interested students and visited the university on a college-organised trip. By the time of the fourth interview, his self-positioning had undergone a further shift. Instead of emphasising his superior performance compared to others, as he had done in previous interviews, he was aware that others were attaining higher grades. Again, this had affected what he considered to be a feasible HE choice:

I think I've chosen universities which are reputable but they are sort of middle of the road. They are not bottom, they are not top, they are just nicely in the middle.

(Interview 4)

For Paul, although certainly not for all the Emily Davies students, the process of mapping from position relative to peers to position on the HE hierarchy (or hierarchies) was extremely fluid, subject to several revisions over the two-year period, and contingent upon ongoing comparisons with friends and peers.

#### **5.4.3 Distortions and exceptions**

This process of mapping one's own perceived position, relative to others, onto a HE hierarchy was evident amongst almost all the young people involved in the research. The only exceptions were Mark, Sarah and Sunita. As discussed above, throughout the research Mark and Sarah were largely unaware of differences in institutional status (and also of the status attached to different degree subjects) – in Sarah's case because she had actively rejected such labels. Thus, for them, there was no evidence of any negotiation of place relative to friends and both came to identify strongly with one particular institution. Sarah was keen to study creative writing and English literature at Bath Spa University because of her interest in the course and her desire to live in Bath. Over the two years, Mark became increasingly determined to attend Brunel and, by the time of the final interview, he stated that, if his grades had not been good enough to secure his place at Brunel he would have preferred to retake his exams than go to another university. It seems likely that Mark's interest in this particular institution can be explained by his limited knowledge of the HE sector. Brunel was the only HEI he knew much about – mainly because his brother was already studying there.

In contrast, Sunita had expended considerable time and energy reading university prospectuses and pouring over numerous newspaper league tables in an attempt to identify suitable (and highly ranked) institutions to which to apply. However, her absolute determination to attend a 'top 30' university significantly distorted the 'mapping' process that was clearly evident amongst her peers. Although she was certainly aware of her academic standing relative to others, this appeared to have little impact on her judgement about what constituted a 'feasible' choice for her. Because of the way in which she disregarded most HEIs outside of the 'top 30', her possible HEI hierarchy was much more limited. Indeed, given her belief that going straight into work would be preferable to attending a low status institution, her calculations were very different from the other young people in the sample.

As she saw it, she had little to lose by ‘aiming high’ and taking a gamble that she would get into what she perceived to be a highly ranked HEI. This determination led her to disregard the advice of her teachers (along with her notion of her place in the hierarchy of students).

However, in all other cases, young people’s HE choices were strongly influenced by the comparisons they made between themselves and others, and the way these comparisons were transposed onto their understanding of the structure of the HE sector, conceptualised in strongly hierarchical terms.

### 5.5 ‘Habitus’ and the mapping process

In contrast to the studies of the HE choices of young people from working class backgrounds (Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001b), there was little evidence of distortion to the *mapping process* on the basis of social class. For example, no students talked about not wanting to attend any particular institution (other than Oxbridge) for reasons related to *social discomfort*. Comments which were frequently reported in Reay *et al.*’s (2001b) study, such as ‘What’s a person like me going to do at a place like that?’ (p.864) were notably absent from the narratives of the Emily Davies students, other than in *academic* terms. However, this is not to deny the impact of class and various other social factors on the process of choice. As outlined previously, both the students’ sense of their own position relative to others and the ways in which they constructed their hierarchies of HE institutions and courses were underpinned by a variety of social factors. Constructions of ‘ability’ and ‘status’ within the HE market were both highly contingent upon the students’ ‘social position’ (although this rarely correlated with simple notions of social class).

The preceding sections of this chapter have illustrated some of the specific ways in which the young people’s HE choices were patterned by their social location. For example, the means by which they constructed their hierarchies of HEIs and courses, and the close correspondence between the views of the young people and their parents/step-parents, strongly supports Bourdieu’s (1976) contention that:

Each family transmits to its children, indirectly rather than directly, a certain *cultural capital* and a certain *ethos*. The latter is a system of implicit and deeply interiorised values which, among other things, helps to define attitudes towards....educational

institutions. (p.110)

Furthermore, the evidence from the careers adviser at the college illustrates one way in which the institution may also be complicit in this perpetuation of social inequality. Bourdieu argues that ‘to penalize the underprivileged and favour the most privileged, the school has only to neglect...to take into account the cultural inequalities between children of different social classes (1976, p.113). By suggesting that the status of HEIs are irrelevant to future social and labour market destinations, the careers adviser did nothing to redress the differences in cultural capital and knowledge of the HE sector evident amongst the Emily Davies students. Despite the way in which potential Oxbridge candidates were tacitly privileged within the college, it appeared to be rare for any member of staff to discuss in a direct way the advantages that research (Brown and Scase, 1994; Dugdale, 1997; Hesketh, 2000) would indicate are associated with attending a high status HEI or studying for a high status subject.

The discussion of ‘hierarchies of students’ highlighted various ways in which a supposedly meritocratic ranking was distorted by social distinctions. This would seem to support Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) theory of cultural reproduction. Liz and Lucy’s belief in their own academic inferiority relative to peers, for example, cannot be explained by the grades they received at college. Instead, the most convincing explanation seems to lie within the assumptions made by their families, their ‘subjective expectations of objective probabilities’ – a process that Bourdieu argues has the effect of reproducing the structure of culture and society.

However, this chapter has also illustrated a number of social processes that do not seem to be adequately explained by Bourdieu’s notion of a durable habitus, or the mechanisms of his theory of cultural reproduction. First, it appears that several of the social processes that distorted the relationship between the ranking of friends and their actual attainment cannot be explained on the basis of SES alone – and thus not in terms of Bourdieu’s theorising. One obvious example of this is the way in which extreme levels of competitiveness within Charlotte, Sinead and Zoë’s group affected their sense of their own academic ability (and, as a result, their HE choices). In this case, Walkerdine *et al.*’s psychosocial theories (discussed in section 5.2.2, above) seem to offer more explanatory power.

Second, the differences between some of the young people from a similar social location may suggest ways in which the young people and their parents were actively attempting to change their habitus. I have argued in Chapter Two that, despite his protestations to the contrary, Bourdieu's description of habitus indicates that it is extremely durable and impervious to change. Despite an acknowledgement that at 'times of crisis', when an adjustment between objective and subjective structures may be needed, the habitus may have a transformative rather than a reproductive role, his writings contain no account of the actual ways in which habitus may develop or be transformed; emphasis remains primarily on its reproductive role. In contrast, several families in this study seemed to have effected substantial intergenerational change. Amongst the sample, very few of the young people came from families with any experience of HE. Nonetheless, several had developed an acute understanding of status differences between HE institutions and courses, and this had underpinned their decision-making processes. For some, this had also led them to adopt specific (and largely successful) strategies to maximise their chances of gaining entry to a high status institution or course (for example, Zoë worked in a nursing home, shadowed relevant professionals and attended a short course for students hoping to study medicine at university). I have suggested that some of these differences between the young people can be explained by the specific contexts in which their parents worked and/or their (self-) identification as 'high achievers' early on in their schooling.

In explaining these patterns, Bourdieu would undoubtedly contend that:

The exceptional success of those few individuals who escape the collective fate of their class apparently justifies educational selection and gives credence to the myth of the school as a liberating force among those who have been eliminated, by giving the impression that success is exclusively a matter of gifts and work. (1976, p.116)

and, indeed, the enduring nature of social inequalities within the HE sector would suggest that such 'transformations of habitus' are not commonplace. Nevertheless, it would seem that these are precisely the kind of changes that warrant further investigation if the social composition of universities and colleges is to be altered in any significant way.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In contrast to Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) claim that friends exert a 'limited influence on educational goals and career plans', this chapter has demonstrated the critical importance of friends and peers to the HE choices made by the young people at Emily Davies College. They played a pivotal role in determining where a young person positioned him/herself relative to others and, as a consequence of the way in which these positions were transposed onto a hierarchy of HE institutions and courses, friends and peers were also very influential in judgements about what constituted a 'feasible' choice. In this way, the chapter supports previous quantitative research that has emphasised the importance of friends and peers (Roberts and Allen, 1997; Moogan *et al.*, 1999). However, it also extends this work by illustrating the specific nature of these influences.

In this chapter I have argued that while the young people's judgements about their own academic attainment relative to others was extremely important in their HE decisions, they did not always correlate very closely to actual differences in attainment. Rankings were distorted by a number of factors including: the level of cultural capital possessed by the young people; competition and constant comparisons with friends; an understanding of ability as 'fixed'; and judgements about how much effort friends had to exert to achieve their results – contrasting with the meritocratic assumptions implicit in the young people's narratives.

Although friends and peers played an important role in the process of HE choice overall, they were less important in the construction of HE hierarchies. Instead, the young people's awareness of status differences between HE institutions and courses, and the value they attached to these differences, seemed to be grounded firmly within the family. In very few cases was there any evidence of familial perceptions being challenged by friends or peers or, indeed, by teachers or careers advisers. Previous studies have highlighted the hierarchical nature of the HE sector (although they have differed in their views of whether or not knowledge about the hierarchy is accessible to all young people). In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a more nuanced account of how HE hierarchies are constructed, emphasising the various different hierarchies that the Emily Davies students formed, and the ways in which course and subject hierarchies intersected with those related to specific institutions.

Most of the recent research on HE choice has focussed on decisions made by young people from working class backgrounds (for example: Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) and/or those from middle class families with a prior history of degree-level study (David *et al.*, 2001a). Those from the lower middle class, or who are the first in their families to go to university, have largely been neglected within the terms of these analyses. In this chapter I have attempted to outline the significant differences between families with the same class location, and thus a number of problems associated with assuming the homogeneity of the middle class. Further, I have emphasised the importance of distinguishing between different fractions of the middle class: relatively few of the families in this study seemed to be engaged in the strategic pursuit of educational advantage that is assumed by some recent theorising. Equally, the behaviour of some of the young people in the sample was more similar to that routinely portrayed as typically working class rather than middle class.

In addition, this chapter also provides evidence of some of the ways in which families without any prior experience of HE and/or from an 'intermediate' class position have attempted to transform their habitus (perhaps most evident in the understanding of hierarchies reached by the families of Becky, Zoë, Simon and Steve). I have argued that, although Bourdieu may claim that such changes merely give 'credence to the myth of the school as a liberating force' (1976, p.116), identifying the characteristics of those who 'escape the collective fate of their class' and the mechanisms through which they effect this is, in itself, an important enterprise. However, while these examples illustrate some of the specific ways in which a small number of parents and young people were attempting to transform their habitus, this must be set against the considerable evidence of enduring dispositions – and the way in which the understanding of the HE sector of many of the young people was firmly grounded within their families, and drew strongly upon the perceptions of their parents/step-parents. For some young people, their habitus was also of central importance in determining their sense of self and their positioning relative to others. Through both these means, HE choices were highly contingent upon social location.

This chapter has illustrated that although the young people rarely engaged in in-depth conversations about their HE choices with their friends (for the reasons outlined in Chapter Four), friends and peers were nonetheless very important in decisions about what constituted a feasible choice of university or course. Despite attempts to avoid discussion of HE topics,

in most cases young people were aware of the positioning of their friends and, as suggested in Chapter Four, this created a number of tensions between friends and within friendship groups. The following chapter pursues this theme in more depth. It describes the range of strategies that the Emily Davies students employed to 'manage' their increasingly unequal friendships. Furthermore, it seeks to explain why almost all the young people chose to maintain their existing friendships rather than change them in line with the emerging changes to their social location. Finally, it explores whether the tensions and difficulties inherent in the young people's friendships can be explained by their particular location (in terms of their age and position on an educational trajectory) or whether they are also likely to be found at other points in the life-course.



## CHAPTER SIX. MANAGING AND MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS

### 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter Four I argued that the differences between friends, which were made explicit by the process of choosing higher education courses and institutions, helped to explain why the young people involved in this study were reluctant to engage in conversations about higher education. Recent theorising on the nature of friendships would suggest that, as the young people became aware of such differences in social location, the equality of their friendships would come under increasing pressure and, in such circumstances, would be likely to change. For example, Allan (1998b) contends that: 'one of the principal features of friendships and other such non-kin sociable relationships is that those involved regard and treat one another as social equals' (p.76) and goes on to argue that:

Difference can be tolerated provided it does not undermine the sense that each party has of the other treating them as of equal social worth. Where such balance is missing, sustaining the relationship as friendship becomes problematic...friendships often lapse if one side's structural location alters sufficiently to make the routine portrayal of equality difficult. (pp.76-77)

However, there is compelling evidence from the research at Emily Davies College that, although the portrayal of equality became difficult for many of the young people, their friendships did not change in this way. Indeed, the stability of many friendship groups over the two-year period was notable. This chapter will argue that, instead of forging new friendships more congruent with their emerging social locations, the students used a variety of strategies to manage their existing friendships. While these included avoiding the topic of conversation, as discussed in Chapter Four, the young people also concealed some of their important thoughts and decisions from their close friends and, in some cases, actively misled them as to their intentions. There is also evidence that many bypassed their close friends to seek confidantes to whom they could talk more freely about their HE choices and deliberations.

After describing these strategies in some depth, this chapter goes on to explore the likely reason why they were deployed and the implications this may have for our conceptualisation

of friendship. It will consider whether similar strategies are practised in other friendships over the life-course, as an attempt to manage difference, or alternatively, whether they are symptomatic of the perceived 'transitional' nature of friendships in the years immediately preceding higher education.

## **6.2 Stability and change in friendships**

### **6.2.1 Patterns of friendship**

The historical and cultural specificity of friendship, and the difficulty of defining who counts as a friend are recurrent themes in the literature (Allan, 1996; Bell and Coleman, 1999; Pahl, 2000; Silver, 1989) and have been discussed in Chapter Three. Nevertheless, the young people involved in this study were able to describe their own friendship networks with considerable clarity, often distinguishing between different degrees of closeness in their friendships, and providing detail about the contexts in which these relationships were practised.

A number of previous studies of the friendships of children and adolescents have contrasted the dyadic intimacy of girls' friendships with the group activity of boys (Griffin, 1985; Hewitt, 1986). For example, Coleman and Hendry (1999) claim that: 'By comparison with adolescent young men, young women are more concerned with forming emotional, intimate relationships with just one, or a few, "best" friends' (p.143). However, amongst the young people from Emily Davies College, there were few such differences by gender. As the descriptions of the young people and their social networks in Appendix 3 demonstrate, a variety of friendship forms were evident – which showed no obvious correlation with gender. For example, a number of young people maintained close dyadic or triadic friendships but, in addition, were part of a wider friendship group (Becky, Clare, Liz, Lucy, Jim and Simon). Mark, Rich and Steve were also part of a larger group and, within this, were able to identify both close and more distant friends amongst their 'social convoy' (Pahl, 2000). Other young people claimed that they were not part of any particular friendship group but had a considerable number of friendships, which had been forged in different contexts (Jenny, Paul, Sarah, Sunita).

This diversity may support Pahl's (2000) contention that marked gender differences in patterns of teenage friendship are now breaking down as the centrality of 'talk' is becoming

equally important to young men and young women. However, the absence of 'talk' about higher education-related topics amongst the Emily Davies students suggests that the arguments of Thorne (1993) and Lees (1993) may be more persuasive. Thorne does not claim that there has been any significant change in young people's friendships but, instead, asserts that there is considerable overlap and variation between the friendships of young men and young women – characteristics which, in the past, have largely been overlooked by researchers. Similarly, Lees' study of adolescent young women revealed that while many had very intense friendships, they also participated in larger groups and knew a wide range of young people.

Another recurrent theme in the literature on young people's friendships is the way in which adolescents move from predominantly single-sex friendships to mixed-sex groups and relationships. For example, Banks *et al.*'s research (1992) revealed that, between the ages of 16 and 20, the social relationships of the young people in their sample underwent significant change, typically moving from same-sex groups and same-sex 'best friend' relationships to 'going out' with someone. A number of researchers have claimed that this transition is characterised, on the part of young women, by an abandonment (or 'deffing out' (Griffin, 1985)) of same-sex friends in favour of the new relationship (Douvan and Adelson, 1966; McCabe, 1981). However, more recent studies have indicated that young women have used a range of positive strategies to resist pressures to drop their girlfriends when they start going out with young men (Griffin, 1985; Lees, 1993) and that many succeed in maintaining close and significant platonic female friendships alongside a romantic relationship (Griffiths, 1987, 1995).

Although nine of the fifteen young people from Emily Davies College had boyfriends or girlfriends over the course of their time at sixth-form college, only one (Lucy) believed that the relationship had had any impact on her wider friendships (see Appendix 3). In all other cases, both the young women and the young men showed signs of fitting their relationship around their other friendships. In many ways, this reflects Morris and Fuller's (1999) description of the friendships of the heterosexual young women in their study: like the Emily Davies students, their respondents were able to maintain their platonic friendships alongside a romantic relationship. Indeed, Morris and Fuller note that far from dropping their friends, the young women in their study assumed a very active role in organising their relationships with young men to ensure that they did not encroach on their pre-existing friendships.

### 6.2.2 The stability of friendships

Throughout the course of the research, few young people reported any significant changes to their friendships. Indeed, a considerable number (including Becky, Clare, Charlotte, Jim, Lucy, Mark, Steve and Simon) maintained close relationships with their friends from secondary school over their two years at Emily Davies College. Although in some cases groups had been enlarged with one or two new members, there was strong continuity in the friendships and many of the young people were able to trace back the history of their friendships to their early teenage years. In contrast to studies that have emphasised the ‘ecological specificity’ of young people’s friendships – the ways in which the nature and basis of friendships can change across different contexts (Allen, 1981) – and the increasingly fluidity of such relationships in recent years (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999), most of the close friends of the young people in this study also attended Emily Davies College. Furthermore, friendships with others who were not at the college had generally been forged at secondary school, again emphasising the pre-eminent role of educational establishments in the structure of young people’s informal relationships.

Not only was there continuity from school to college, but there was also strong continuity during college (in part supported by the college’s policy of grouping students from the same feeder school together for tutor periods). Out of the fifteen young people, only Zoë and Rich claimed to have moved into new friendship groups and, as the subsequent discussion in this chapter will illustrate, Zoë, nonetheless, maintained strong links with her old friends. Indeed, at the end of the two years, Charlotte, one of these old friends, claimed that she and Zoë were as good friends as ever, and that there had been few changes to their group while they had been at Emily Davies College. All the other young people who took part in this research described the strong stability of their friendships. The following comments were typical:

Lucy: I met a few new friends through the courses that I did – but it was only a few. Generally, this group of people from...the school I went to stuck in a group and we stuck together, and they’re the people I socialise with out of college – the same people I sat with when I had a break at college. (Interview 6)

Steve: We decided to stick to each to his own and that, rather than the hassle of mixing [with other students at college]....I'd never actually made a proper effort [to make new friends]. (Interview 6)

Charlotte: I find it a bit difficult to make new friends because I've been in the same friendship group since I was really young....When we got there [college]...there was no one else there from our school so by default we had to like cling together. All of us stayed friends because we knew each other, we were doing a lot of the same stuff, so it was just easier. (Interview 6)

Despite clear indications that the young women and young men at Emily Davies College were aware of different emerging social positions (see Chapter Four), there was no evidence that these other young people had made any attempt to change their friends. Instead, they attempted to 'manage' these differences, and thus their friendships, by deploying some of the strategies that are discussed below.

### **6.3 Strategies to manage friendships**

Allan (1996) claims that change in friendship is both routine and normal. He argues that although the common understanding of friendship is based on ideas about solidarity, liking and trust, changes in the social position of one friend usually have considerable impact on the friendship itself: 'the relationships slowly become less active; gradually new friends who are compatible with the new status and developed life-style take their place' (p.97). By changing friendship networks in this way, Allan suggests that the individual is able to generate support for his or her new social identity. However, as the previous section has shown, over the course of the research, there was a notable stability to the majority of the young people's friendships. Instead of taking steps to change their friends and forging new relationships with young people with more similar and equal social locations, most of the young people in the sample employed a range of different strategies to maintain their existing friendships in the face of growing awareness of distance.

In relation to this growing awareness, across the sample as a whole it is possible to identify five main strategies that the young people employed to manage their friendships during their

two years at Emily Davies College: avoiding HE-related topics of conversation; refusing to engage in such conversations when initiated by others; concealing decisions and choices; misleading friends; and choosing confidantes on a very pragmatic basis. As will be clear from the discussion below, there was a certain degree of overlap between some of these strategies; the boundaries between them were not always obvious. Nonetheless, categorising them in this way helps to elucidate some of the specific ways in which the young people tried to maintain their friendships.

### **6.3.1 Avoiding, concealing and misleading**

The first of these, *avoidance*, describes the way in which a number of young people took steps to avoid the topic of higher education with specific members of their friendship group. For some, the strategy of avoidance was driven by the need to avoid highlighting likely geographical separation – although this seemed to be underpinned by an awareness of different views about the nature, or likely future course, of friendships. Becky's avoidance of all HE-related talk with her best friend Jane illustrates the young people's use of this strategy, as does Liz's report about her friend Alice.

Rachel: Do you think that puts strains on the friendship generally [differences in likely HE destinations]?

Becky: It's not because we've not discussed it really so it's not at all a problem. I'm sure it's going to be definitely between me and Jane when I go away because I'm so determined to move away to university....It's below the surface at the moment. We're trying to avoid it all. (Interview 4)

Liz: Alice's in a serious relationship with her boyfriend for about a year and like...I don't know what's happening with them, cos they don't like talking about it.

Rachel: What – neither her nor her boyfriend?

Liz: Yeah, cos they both want to go to separate places or whatever, so it's a bit dodgy. (Interview 5)

There were many other examples of avoidance from other young people throughout the two-year period. However, in most other cases the purpose of the strategy seemed to be to avoid

highlighting differences in the status assigned to particular universities or likely positions on these emerging hierarchies, rather than different views of friendship. Sunita's comments were typical of many:

Sunita: To tell you the truth, I'd never heard of Lampeter and I was saying 'Where's that?' 'It's in Wales', 'OK, I'd never heard of it.' I was just thinking, she wants to go to a place that no one's ever heard. I won't say anything to her.....I didn't say anything to her. I thought it might be a bit rude.

Rachel: Why did you think it might be a bit rude?

Sunita: It might upset her a little bit: you know, 'You're applying to such a low university' or something. Cos she really wants to go. (Interview 5)

A second, and related, strategy can be identified as a young person's *refusal* to engage in an HE-related topic of conversation, when raised by others. In most cases this took the form of actively trying to change the subject. Again, Becky deployed this strategy in her attempts to manage her relationship with her best friend, Jane:

Becky: And she's decided that she's not going to university. She's completely ruled that out as well.

Rachel: So is that something you consciously try not to mention in front of her?

Becky: It is, yeah. But she has said stuff like 'Oh don't move away!' and I've been like 'Let's talk about something else.' But yes, it is really awkward. (Interview 3)

Liz also described how her girlfriend had refused to discuss higher education with her, primarily to avoid making explicit likely changes to their relationship.

Liz: ...They don't really want to talk about it. I've tried but they just went, 'No.'

Rachel: Why's that?

Liz: Cos they don't want to think about it cos obviously if I go to London and they'd be here it would be a bit dodgy.

- Rachel: Is that a topic of conversation you try to avoid then?
- Liz: Well, they do, yeah. I try to bring it up but.....
- Rachel: Is it something that's pretty difficult to talk about?
- Liz: Yeah, it is.
- Rachel: Just because of the possibility of being geographically separated?
- Liz: Yeah. (Interview 5)

A further strategy described by the young people was to engage in a conversation about higher education but to *conceal* some specific aspect or detail of their own thoughts, decisions or choices. This was again illustrated well by Becky in her conversations with her wider friendship group. At the time of the first interview, most of her friends were aware that she was keen to go on to university. They did not, however, know about her ambition to study at Oxford or Cambridge:

- Rachel: Is that something that you've consciously not told them?
- Becky: Yes. It is actually. I know a lot of them feel a bit overshadowed by the grades that I get.....so I don't want to shove my achievements in their faces. So I don't say anything about it. (Interview 1)

Similarly, Paul had concealed his interest in applying to Oxford from his friends. This was prompted not so much by a concern for their feelings but by a desire to protect himself, to ensure that he was not perceived as over-confident or over-ambitious. Furthermore, Steve acknowledged that, within his own friendship group, some people were likely to conceal the places and courses they were interested in, 'because they don't want to be seen as inferior' (Interview 2). This appeared to be the case for Mark, one of Steve's friends, who revealed that:

- Mark: I probably wouldn't say much about the courses I want to take.
- Rachel: Why's that?
- Mark: [...] cos they take the mickey out of me for doing classical civilization. (Interview 3)

Finally, three students revealed that in their attempts to manage their friendships they had actively *misled* some of their friends about some aspect of their HE choices. Although



Charlotte had attended one of the talks that the college organised for students interested in applying to Oxford or Cambridge, she had indicated to Zoë (at the time, her closest friend) that she had not gone to any of the meetings. Indeed, as far as Zoë was aware, Charlotte could not be persuaded to go:

Rachel:       What about your other friends – because you're in quite a big group of friends – were any of the other people quite keen to go [to the Oxbridge meeting]?

Zoë:           No. One of my other friends, Charlotte, from my main group of friends was going to go but she decided not to. Some of my friends, like they are predicted really good grades, and I was like, 'Go on, just come along. It's not like saying you're definitely going to go there' but they didn't want to. (Interview 2)

The most plausible explanation for Charlotte's behaviour, given her sensitivity to the emerging differences in academic attainment between herself and Zoë (discussed in Chapters Four and Five), seems to be a fear that Zoë (and possibly others in her friendship group) would think that she was 'aiming too high', aspiring to an unrealistically high place on the university hierarchy and circumventing the ranking of individuals within the group.

Jim's motivation for misleading his friends about his higher education choices echoes some of the themes that are suggested in this interpretation of Charlotte's decision. He articulated clearly the problems he envisaged if he was honest about his ambitions and, in particular, the differences that such talk would emphasise between him and his friends in his physics class (whom he perceived as more intelligent than him). Although he had applied for a physics foundation year at most of the institutions he had chosen, he explained that:

Jim:           .....I don't tell a lot of people what I'm doing or if I do I say 'management'. I don't say the physics cos, I don't know...it's not...cos some people will say 'Management and physics? You're not good enough to do physics.' ...I just feel a bit insecure about it I guess cos I feel a bit...I'd feel very put down if they said I wasn't good enough. But that's what I want to do. (Interview 5)

Becky also used this strategy, in conjunction with the other three outlined above, to manage her relationship with Jane. In response to Jane's obvious distress at the possibility of her best friend moving to another part of the country, she decided to underplay her own strong desire to move away and imply that she was still considering studying at a local university.

### **6.3.2 The pragmatic choice of confidantes**

Lees (1993) maintains that 'listening uncritically to your friend is a crucial aspect of the rapport' upon which young women's relationships are built (p.76). However, as Chapter Four has shown, the young people at Emily Davies College rarely engaged their close friends in discussions about higher education; the opportunity to 'listen uncritically' was seldom offered. Nevertheless, many had talked about their choices with at least some of their peers (although, in most cases, this was not at any great length), thus suggesting that a further strategy was employed to maintain friendships: the pragmatic choice of confidantes.

Only three of the young people involved in this research (Charlotte, Clare and Simon) claimed that they spoke mainly to their closest friends about higher education choice for the sole reason that they were their best friends. These students believed that sharing life plans was an important, and commonly practised, component of close friendships:

Charlotte: I've always known [that I wanted to go to university]....since I was in the infant school. Me and my friends, we were always tracing out a pattern: junior school, secondary school, college, university....We always discuss if we've got good enough grades to go [to university] and what we want to do when we're older, what courses we want to do, things like that. (Interview 1)

Simon: A couple of my friends I talk to more about universities than the others.

Rachel: Why's that?

Simon: Cos I'm better friends with them, that's all. More about what you're going to do with your life. (Interview 4)

These comments reflect assumptions that pervade much of the sociological literature on friendship about the importance of mutual disclosure in close friendships (Allan, 1996;

Giddens, 1992; Lees, 1993; Pahl, 1998; Willmott, 1987). Indeed, as noted in Chapter One, Hendry *et al.* (1993) claim that the change in friendships from childhood to adolescence can be characterised as: ‘a move to intimacy that includes the development of a more exclusive focus, openness to self-disclosure and the sharing of problems and advice’ (p. 115). However, such assumptions were largely absent from the accounts of the other young people at Emily Davies College in relation to HE. Furthermore, the absence of any significant degree of discussion between Zoë and Charlotte about their higher education choices and their career aspirations (discussed above and also in Chapter Four), suggests that even when young people did believe that mutual disclosure of life plans was an important part of close friendship, it was often difficult to translate this into practice. This was as much the case with boy/girlfriends as with platonic relationships. Jim reported speaking more about universities to his girlfriend, Elaine, than to other friends but he was the exception in this sample: no other young person reported speaking more about their higher education decisions to their boy/girlfriend than to their other friends. Instead, there is strong evidence that the young people were extremely selective about whom they spoke to about their higher education choices. In most cases, selection was made on the basis of a perceived similarity in some key aspect of the decision-making process, often bypassing close friends.

The basis on which the young people selected ‘confidantes’ shows strong parallels with the various differences that were made explicit by the process of higher education choice, discussed in Chapter Four. First, several young people spoke to those whom they perceived as having a similar level of commitment to higher education as them. In most cases, this involved selecting one friend from a larger group to talk to. For Sunita, it was important to talk to someone who was equally keen to apply:

- Sunita: I can speak a bit more openly with Isobel, but not with everybody else.  
 Rachel: Why’s that?  
 Sunita: Because we’re both like on the same road. We’re both doing geography, we both want to go to university desperately. The others, I don’t think they are interested, really. Us two, we think the same because we both want to go, but my other friends, they are like, they don’t have that feel. (Interview 3)

Others (Clare, Lucy, Sarah and Simon) were more concerned to talk to students who, like them, were having doubts about the future and who were more ambivalent about higher education. For example, although she was part of a large friendship group and had two best friends, Lucy had confined her talk about university to Susie:

Rachel: Have you talked about university with any other of your friends?

Lucy: No, not really. It's only me and my friend who have [both] questioned whether we'll go. (Interview 2)

Lucy: Where both me and Susie don't know about it, we sometimes talk about it and say, 'Oh God, we're actually going to have to start thinking about it soon'. But with Megan, she's always known what she's going to do, so I don't discuss it with her. (Interview 2)

Second, some young people had restricted their higher education conversations to others who were applying to study similar subjects at university. There were many examples of this: Mark had talked mainly to others who had applied for American Studies; Paul had generally restricted his conversations to others who had applied to read law; and Zoë had spoken to others who had applied for medicine and other science courses. Steve had been equally selective, in seeking out others who were interested in politics courses:

Steve: I've talked to Ben a lot, cos he wants to do similar courses to me, politics and that, so I talked to him a lot about it, but other than that, no one really. (Interview 2)

As discussed in previous chapters, the grades the young people expected to achieve in their A Levels had considerable influence on their judgements about the type of university that they felt constituted a 'feasible' choice. It is therefore unsurprising that some young people selected their confidantes on the basis of the grades that others had been predicted. Becky and Steve were both explicit about this:

Rachel: How come you've discussed it with her [friend who told her about the meeting for people interested in applying to Oxbridge]?

Becky: Cos she definitely wants to go there as well. She had ten A\*s in her GCSEs – she’s always been a bit of a genius! I don’t feel like, I feel like we’re not sort of equal, but more on the same level, if you know what I mean. So it’s easier to talk to her about it because she won’t be thinking at the back of her mind, ‘Oh it’s not fair that she can go off and do this’ – and we can talk about it more easily. (Interview 2)

Steve: I talk to Joe a bit about it although it’s kind of different with Joe, cos me and Ben, we’ve got pretty much the same grades, we’re both thinking about politics and things like that, whereas Joe’s kind of three As and law, and he’s thinking about these better, or perhaps more stringent, requirements for these places. (Interview 3)

Furthermore, Clare explained why she had spoken to her friend Shaun, rather than her best friend Juliet:

[Juliet is] exceptionally intelligent so it’s not really....everything’s certain with her. She knows what she’s doing, she knows where she’s going. Whereas Shaun, he got good grades for his A Levels and everything, you know, but he’s slightly more on my level. You know, he was saying he was nervous about his exam results. Juliet was saying that she was nervous, but you knew deep down that she was going to get what she wanted. Whereas Shaun, when he was saying he was nervous – you could relate to him more. (Interview 6)

Similarity was not the only basis for selecting confidantes, however. Three of the young people, at various points over the two-year period, actively took steps to avoid conversations with those they perceived to be similar to them, in some of the areas discussed above. Jim’s case serves as a good illustration of this. As will have been clear from the preceding discussion (in section 6.3.1), although he shared with many of his friends in his physics class a strong interest in physics and a desire to go on to study the subject at university, he was careful to avoid discussing higher education with them. Instead, he turned to other friends who were studying arts-based subjects. He explained that this was because:

Jim: ...they're all doing art and photography and stupid things and it's easier to talk to them cos they don't judge your intelligence. They just presume I'm intelligent cos I'm doing physics and they think 'Oh yeah, you're doing that [physics at university] cos it sounds good for you.' (Interview 4)

Zoë and Charlotte's avoidance of conversations about higher education can be interpreted in a similar way. Although the two young women were studying very similar subjects, were both achieving high grades and, during the first year of college, were interested in the same career, they spoke about their HE plans very little. Zoë turned to others in her subject classes to discuss the progress of her HE application, while Charlotte spoke most to Sinead – another member of their friendship group, but one who had less in common with her in terms of career ambitions and attainment in college tests. It seems likely that these choices of confidante were driven by the competition between the two young women and the importance that Charlotte, at least, attributed to the differences between them (particularly in terms of academic attainment).

## **6.4 The purpose and impact of the strategies**

The strategies adopted by the young people had the overall aim of maintaining their friendships during a period in which the equality of the friendship tie was being threatened by emerging differences and a growing awareness of different social locations in both the present and the future. Strategies were used to mask, or at least to deflect attention away from, the various types of emerging difference which have been discussed in previous chapters, such as: probable HE destination, level of academic attainment, view of university life, and the implied status differences associated with these specific areas.

### **6.4.1 Protecting themselves**

The various strategies differed in terms of whom they were aimed at – whether they were intended to mask the young person's own position or that of one or more of their friends. First, several of the young people were concerned to protect themselves; to ensure that they were not perceived as deviating too significantly from group norms. This was a particularly common strategy when the young person saw himself or herself as different from an otherwise fairly homogenous group. Becky, Sunita and Jim typified this response. At

several points throughout the research, Becky talked about how she felt different from her close friends in terms of higher education ambitions and also probable destinations – and how this had motivated her to avoid such conversations or to actively mislead her friends.

Similarly, Sunita felt that the importance she placed on institutional status and the time she had devoted to finding out about universities and colleges differentiated her from her close friends. Her strategies of avoidance were driven by the thought that, if she talked about her decisions, her friends would probably find her boring. As discussed above, Jim misled his friends about his own HE intentions, claiming that he had applied to read management rather than physics. This was prompted by a lack of confidence in his own ability and a belief that he was not as intelligent as his friends in his physics class:

Rachel:       What about friends in your physics class? Is it something you talk about with them?

Jim:           Not particularly, cos a lot of them...well, most of them are more intelligent than me and going on to do like physics and engineering...it does feel funny. (Interview 5)

These young people were seeking to maintain their friendships by concealing what they perceived as the growing distance between themselves and the other members of their friendship groups.

Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow from this that the young people did not value conversations with peers about the choices they were making. By choosing confidantes in this very pragmatic way, often overlooking the bonds of close friendship, the young people indicated that peers played some role in the decision-making process by, for example, providing information about specific universities and courses or reassurance that others were making similar choices. However, this would also suggest that they perceived areas of common interest quite narrowly. Charlotte saw little point in engaging a friend who was keen on teaching in conversation, as her own interests lay elsewhere, while Paul claimed that it was difficult to talk about higher education to people who had applied to study subjects other than law.

### 6.4.2 Protecting their friends

Second, many of the strategies employed by the young people were motivated by a desire to protect their friends and, in particular, individuals whom they (and, in most cases, others within the friendship group) perceived as deviating from group norms or whom they saw as occupying lower positions than them on the emerging hierarchies of academic ability and institutional status. This kind of reasoning was employed by many of the young people at various points throughout the two-year period and is illustrated by Lucy's concern about her friend, Megan:

- Lucy: One of my friends got a bad result in her exams so we don't really like to say – cos it's three Bs to do this public relations course – and she got like really bad results so now she just wants to go to the Institute cos she thinks that's the only place she can go....so in that aspect, we can't say 'Oh God, I've got to get three Bs' – when she got really bad results, we can't really say [that] in front of her.
- Rachel: So, is that something you've tried not to bring up?
- Lucy: Yeah. (Interview 3)

This suggests that many of the young people took considerable steps to maintain an illusion of equality in their friendships. In her study of adolescent girls, Lees (1993) claims that 'boasting for men is about enhancing status, but for women it violates girls' egalitarian ethic, which emphasizes connection and similarity' and goes on to suggest that 'girls fear rejection if they appear too successful' (p.83). In contrast, as the evidence above demonstrates, at Emily Davies College both the young men and the young women seemed to possess an 'egalitarian ethic', which informed the practice of their friendships; the importance of at least a *perception* of equality within friendships, emphasised in both the sociological and psychological literature (Allan, 1998a; Douvan and Adelson, 1961; Bukowski *et al.*, 1996), seemed as important to the young men as to their female counterparts.

### 6.4.3 The impact on friendships

The strategies outlined in this section indicate that the young people took considerable steps to maintain their friendships – by masking decisions and choices which would have otherwise emphasised different emerging social locations or values. The success of these strategies is evident in the stability of their friendships over the two years: despite an



awareness of difference, few of the young people 'broke away' from old friends and, similarly, few made many new close friends. This provides a strong contrast both to everyday understandings of friendship – the modern ideal which has trust at its core (Willmott, 1987; Pahl, 2000) – and to the sociological theories which suggest that friendships will change in line with changes to social location (Allan, 1996, 1998a, 1998b). The Emily Davies students were able to employ a variety of strategies to manage and maintain friendships that they themselves perceived to be increasingly unequal.

Furthermore, by seeking out others to talk about specific aspects of their higher education choices, the young people were able to gain relevant information, reassurance or simply an opportunity to talk about themselves, while avoiding the difficulties that they feared such conversations would prompt if they had been held with close friends. Evidence that people confide in those outside their network of close friends is not new. For example, Sutor's (1987) study of the friendship networks of married mothers who had returned to college found evidence of 'substitution' of confidantes. Over the course of a year, the women who had returned to study on a full-time basis chose to talk more to the well-educated members of their pre-existing network of friends and tended to talk less to the less-educated members, even though the latter may have been perceived as 'closer' friends. Furthermore, Allan (1996) notes that while 'people often limit who they confide in...choosing only their closest, most trusted friends....*at times the process can act in reverse*' (p.110, italics added). However, in these two cases, confiding in others is seen as a likely precursor to establishing closer friendships:

Confiding in someone who has not previously been that close, for example, because they have undergone a similar experience, can result in the development of a stronger bond...this may be an important way in which friendship networks gradually get modified. (Allan, 1996, p.110-111)

Where this study diverges from these is in suggesting that the pragmatic choice of confidantes was not part of the process of breaking away from friends and forging new relationships. Instead, it was one of several strategies deployed to maintain existing friendships. Amongst the Emily Davies students, conversations with confidantes remained tightly focussed on HE-related topics and rarely did friendships strengthen as a result of the shared confidence.

The evidence presented in this section not only demonstrates that the young people were able to maintain friendships that they perceived as unequal, but it also helps to elaborate the specific ways in which they were able to do this. As such, it complements Zorn's (1995) work on the ways in which friends, who were also work colleagues, attempted to maintain their relationship after a change to the equality of their friendship – as a result of the promotion of one of the friends. For example, he describes how, in some cases, the 'subordinate' left the firm and, in others, how the promoted friend (now acting in a supervisory capacity) pretended his instructions came from his supervisor and, when talking to his friend, used 'suggestions' rather than 'directions'. However, while Zorn's respondents spoke about their relationships becoming more distant, the friendships of the Emily Davies students were striking in their stability over the course of the research.

## **6.5 Explaining the strategies**

The strategies that have been outlined in this chapter were evident throughout the two-year period of data collection at Emily Davies College. Almost all of the young people described ways in which they had tried to manage their existing friendships. The compelling evidence that they provided, of the ways in which increasingly unequal friendships were maintained, prompts two closely related questions. First, why did they employ these strategies? And second, why did they not change their friends?

### **6.5.1 The significance of educational differences**

I would suggest that there are three possible responses to these questions. The first is to argue that the differences between the young people, outlined in Chapters Four and Five, and rehearsed in this chapter, were not particularly significant. Despite differences in academic attainment and likely higher education destination, the young people continued to share other, more important, aspects of their lives, and these ensured that they also continued to perceive their social locations as similar. Miles (2000), for example, argues that it is youth lifestyles and, in particular, *consumer* lifestyles that give meaning to young people's lives and play a central part in the construction of their identities. Thus, despite significant differences in attainment, a shared 'consumer lifestyle' amongst friends could ensure the continuation of a perceived similarity in social location. Dwyer and Wyn (2001) also emphasise the multi-dimensional nature of many young people's lives. Indeed, they claim that one of the effects of prolonged entry into career paths over recent decades has been to allow young people

more time to assess their priorities concerning their adult lives, serving 'to reinforce the belief that the other areas of life are of at least equal importance' [to education and career] (p.188). Alternatively, Wolf (1998) maintains that it is hierarchies of sexual development and sexual attractiveness that structure the lives of many young women, and provide the main axis upon which they rank themselves and their peers. Within the terms of these various analyses, academic standing relative to friends and awareness of different educational futures may seem relatively unimportant.

Although, theoretically, these are plausible arguments, they are not consistent with the data from this research. The language the Emily Davies students used to talk about the differences between themselves and their friends, and the significance they attached to these differences, suggests that educational destinations were extremely important to them. Indeed, the effort required to pursue the strategies outlined in this chapter lends weight to this hypothesis. Furthermore, higher education decisions were not viewed solely as a choice about education *per se*; they were inextricably bound up with other decisions about career and lifestyle and, as such, were imbued with considerable significance. In many cases, differing views about higher education reflected differing attitudes to, for example, the future, the importance of moving away from home and, in some cases, the nature of friendship itself. Moreover, there is evidence from other sources that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, young people are continuing to see education as central to their life chances and future social location. For example, Roberts (1997) argues that the things that remain most important to most young people are their education, families and future job prospects (rather than their leisure pursuits), while Savage (2000) maintains that over the last few decades, as class effects have become increasingly mediated through educational processes, doing well educationally has become progressively more important for all young people. This seems to be supported by evidence from America (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999), which has also suggested that academic progress has increased in importance amongst young people over recent decades, such that 'being admitted to a competitive college is an important marker of social status' (p.190).

It seems likely that the importance of educational difference in the young people's lives was also heightened by other broad social and cultural values, prevalent both inside and outside the college and, in particular, the importance attached to competition. In her study of US schools, Lesko (2001) argues that a competitive ethos pervades educational institutions and is

partially derived from more general social values: 'these bureaucratic arrangements are contextualised within and influenced by a nationalistic exhortation to compete harder and better....the broader US society and our schools boastfully advertise these traits and their benefits' (p.186) – and similar competitive cultures have been identified within British schools and colleges (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Thus, while Allen's (1981) assertion that the 'values of intellectual achievement promoted by the school become means of gaining prestige among one's classmates' (p.190) is not necessarily supported by the data discussed in this chapter, it seems highly likely that educational differences were of considerable importance to the Emily Davies students because of the way in which they believed them to be intimately related to status and social differences recognised by and of significance within the outside world.

### **6.5.2 The uniqueness of young people's friendships?**

A second possible explanation for the use of the strategies described in this chapter would emphasise the similarities between the young people's friendships and others that are made and maintained throughout the life-course. This would argue that the differences and difficulties apparent in the young people's friendships are inherent in many other friendships and that, instead of being predicated upon a strong mutual perception of similarity, in practice, friendship involves a continual negotiation of difference. This explanation would suggest strong parallels between the friendships of children and adolescents and those of older people. Traditionally, many sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists have distinguished clearly between the types of friendship forged in childhood and adolescence and those made later in life (Berndt, 1999; Duck, 1983; Hendry *et al.*, 1993; Hunter, 1985; Reed-Danahay, 1999). One of the clearest statements of this is provided by Douvan and Adelson (1966) who claim that: 'The peer relations of adolescence are part of the preparation for adult love and friendship: by loving and being loved, by making friends and being befriended, the child learns something of the vicissitudes of affection....because it carries so much of the burden of adolescent youth, friendship acquires at this time a persistence and intensity it has never had before nor (in many cases) will ever have again' (p.174). This is contrasted with adult friendship, which they maintain is 'no more than a mutual flight from boredom – a pact against isolation, with an amendment against intimacy' (p.178).

However, as Allen (1981) notes, there is no general agreement about whether children and young people's friendships are different from those formed at other points in the life-course.

For example, research that has focussed specifically on the construction of difference has highlighted significant similarities across age groups. Children's and adolescents' friends are typically of the same sex (Banks *et al.*, 1992; Walker, 1988), social class (Blackman, 1992; Hey, 1997; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Rezende, 1999) and ethnic background (Fuller, 1984; Hewitt, 1986; Walker, 1988), leading Jamieson (1998) to conclude that: 'it seems that children quickly learn to reproduce wider social divisions and inequalities' (p.94) – a process which continues into later life. Such claims resonate with wider debates about the extent to which 'youth' constitutes a distinct and easily delineated period in one's life. Wallace and Kovatcheva (1998) and Lesko (2001), for example, argue against an essentialist understanding of youth, pointing out that the precise age that is associated with youth differs between societies and that factors which appear to be psychological or biological universals often turn out to be socially relative. Roberts (1997) pursues this argument further, maintaining that a general destandardization of the life course (resulting from changes to both the labour market and the practice of relationships) has led to greater variety within all age groups, thus making it 'hazardous to generalize about the circumstances and behaviour of people at any given age...there is no longer a normal situation for a person aged 18, 21 or 25' (p.3). This suggests that it may be unwise to assume the uniqueness of young people's friendships.

Other empirical evidence of the differences and difficulties inherent in young people's friendships would lend weight to this position. For example, Hey (1997) argues that for the girls (aged between 11 and 18) involved in her research, friendship groups helped them define themselves against others, rather than affirm their similarity or increase their identification with each other. Indeed, many of the friendships she describes were ridden with competition and an awareness of within-group difference. There is also a growing body of evidence documenting the complexity of the friendships of older people. Historical studies of informal relationships have shown how, in the past, many friendships were built on status inequality, primarily to avoid jealousy and rivalry (Silver, 1989), while Zeldin (1995) argues that it has been common for friendships to be 'confused with pride and clashed with competitiveness' (p.322). Furthermore, Pahl (2000) suggests that within contemporary society:

As friends become closer and more salient for people's identities and serve as the focus for resolving some of their internal problems, so they, too can become

enmeshed in a complex emotional maelstrom...They may bring out deep and unresolved feelings of guilt. (p.129-30)

He argues that the importance attached to friendship at the turn of the twenty-first century increases the likelihood of 'buried emotions' such as jealousy, anger and competitiveness being experienced between friends. Jamieson (1998) conceptualises friendship in a different way, largely in opposition to the idea of the 'pure relationship' put forward by Pahl (1998, 2000) and Giddens (1992), but also points to the tensions and difficulties inherent in contemporary adult friendships. She contends that few friendships fulfil the widely-held ideals of friendship (such as being honest, trusting and open within the relationship), asserting instead that 'people actually settle for more modest forms' (p.165).

However, stronger empirical evidence is required in order to claim that the strategies employed by the Emily Davies students, in the face of increasing inequalities, are reflected in attempts to maintain friendships at other points in life. Although there are a small number of examples of adults attempting to negotiate hierarchies and inequalities in their friendships (Zorn, 1995) and deceiving their friends (Miller *et al.*, 1986), further research is needed to explore whether the differences, difficulties and strategies for maintaining friendships outlined in this chapter are replicated widely within adult friendships.

### **6.5.3 Transitional friendships?**

A third, and final, possible explanation for the effort exerted by many of the young people in maintaining their friendships, is that they viewed their friendships as transitional and subject to inevitable change on entry to higher education. Although managing existing friendships required some effort, it was ultimately less time-consuming, and possibly less stressful, than forging new friendships during the two years of sixth-form college. This thesis is more congruent with the young people's narratives than either of the theses outlined previously: many talked at length, and in several interviews, about how they expected their friendships to change quite considerably when they began university.

Lucy: ...we've all been together since we were 11, since school...and we know that we're....cos we do this thing at Christmas, we get together, and everyone's saying 'This is going to be our last Christmas altogether, cos everyone's moving to different places', cos I know a

couple of my friends are going to Loughborough and another really wants to go to Nottingham to do law and one of my friends is staying here and then you've got people who are working and me moving away. It's weird cos we've always...we came to college from school together.... (Interview 4)

Simon: I mean university is probably the time you want to break away and meet new friends and stuff. I mean, still have them, but go off on your own a bit. (Interview 5)

Clare: I want to go away and start again.

Rachel: Is that quite important to you – making new friends?

Clare: Yeah. I want to get some new experiences and things. (Interview 5)

In their accounts of the new friendships they anticipated making at university, the young people echoed Pahl's (2000) belief that friendships made in higher education are characterised by a particularly strong type of bonding. He argues that:

...the expansion of higher education, especially among women, has greatly increased the opportunity for making friends. A growing proportion of young people in their early twenties who are in higher or further education also have the time and opportunity to make friends to match their emerging identities. (p.171)

In his view, friendships are strengthened by the shared experience of living away from home for the first time and facing problems together. Many of the young people involved in this research seemed to hold similar views about their future friendships. It is arguable whether the quality of university friendships is as clearly distinguished from friendships made at other points of the life-course as Pahl suggests – particularly when an increasing numbers of students are choosing to live at home (UCAS, 2000a). Nevertheless, the ideal of such relationships was widely subscribed to by the Emily Davies students and, as such, may have provided strong motivation to postpone changes to friendships while at sixth-form college.

Implicit in several of the young people's accounts was an awareness that their friends may not share their own views of friendship nor their views of the increasing inequality of their

relationship. This may have made forging new friendships while at college more problematic, and have provided further motivation to postpone changes until at university – when geographical distance would make such changes less difficult. The perceived transitory nature of many of the friendships is again suggested in these accounts:

Jim: She [girlfriend] was going to come to Sussex but....it may sound a bit harsh but I said to her, 'I don't want to go to the same university as you cos I want my independence.' It's not as though I split up with her. It's just that I wanted to be thrown in at the deep end, so to speak. If I was like stuck with people I already knew I wouldn't be so expressive and I wouldn't make friends which is what I believe is the whole point of university, apart from getting your degree....so I didn't really discuss it much with her cos she really got upset. (Interview 5)

Zoë: ...I don't want to talk too much cos a lot us are going to Southampton or have put that as our first choice and I don't know, I kind of want to move on a bit, find and meet other people, kind of thing. I don't want to sort of say 'Yeah, we're all applying to Southampton' so that other people think 'I'll apply to Southampton as well'.

Rachel: So why don't you want to talk about it with other people who are going to Southampton?

Zoë: Well, they'll talk about 'Oh we can get a flat together' and I'm like 'No, no!' (Interview 5)

Becky: Some of the others...they have done things because they thought they'd have the safety net of having old friends with them or whatever, so....

Rachel: But that kind of thing isn't important to you?

Becky: It's not really. Cos you're not going to have them for the rest of your life, so you've got to get used to it at some point. (Interview 5)

This interpretation of the young people's friendships as 'transitional' articulates with part of Lesko's (2001) argument about the way in which 'time' has been understood in adolescence. She suggests that since the beginning of the twentieth century, the transitory nature of



adolescence has been emphasised. Youth have been defined as ‘always “becoming”, waiting for the future to arrive’ (p.131), a definition which has provoked ‘endless watching, monitoring and evaluating’ (p.111) on the part of adults, and a passivity on the part of young people as they are told that only the future matters, and that it is the *end* of the adolescent story that is key. Similar themes resonate within the accounts of the young people at Emily Davies College that have been discussed above; many contrasted their present friendships with the more fulfilling relationships they hoped to form in the future (and at university, in particular) and, as a consequence, were prepared to put up with apparently unsatisfactory relationships in the short term. However, it would seem wrong to equate this with passivity: while the young people were certainly putting off making changes to their friends, they were also engaged in a very active process of managing their friendships.

#### **6.5.4 (Re)conceptualising young people’s friendships**

As some of the preceding discussion may have suggested, many of the ways in which young people’s relationships have been conceptualised seem to be predicated on a largely functionalist understanding of friendship. As Morris and Fuller (1999) note: ‘Adolescence is commonly conceptualised as a time when young people move away from the confines of the family and look to the peer group for support from others going through similar experiences’ (p.532). Establishing one’s own identity, distinct from the family, is seen as a key process of ‘youth’ (Krappman, 1996) and one which is facilitated by friends and peers: ‘Like seeks like, and while this is generally true at all ages, it is, we feel, more apt to be so during the adolescent period....the need is to define personal identity; to accomplish this, the youngster needs the reassurance and mirroring offered by others of the same disposition’ (Douvan and Adelson, 1966, p.183). Indeed, Lesko (2001) argues that an orientation towards peers is one of the central ways in which adolescence has been characterized since the early twentieth century. However, the evidence presented in this chapter (and also in Chapters Four and Five) does not accord with these functionalist interpretations of young people’s friendships. While Chapter Five showed that friends and peers certainly played a key role in the young people’s understanding of their own academic ability (and thus some part in the construction of their identities), the deep ambivalences that underlay many of the friendships suggests that the unconditional ‘reassurance’ and ‘mirroring’ assumed by Douvan and Adelson was extremely unlikely.

Similar functionalist assumptions also underpin recent theorising of the 'pure relationship', which was discussed in Chapters One and Four (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Pahl, 1998). While these theorists differ from those discussed above by emphasising the greater degree of choice an individual has with regards to whom he or she forms close friendships with, they largely concur in their views of the function of such relationships. For example, Pahl (1998) argues that:

In a seemingly more risky world, where neither employment nor family relationships may be able to provide an enduring sense of security, certain kinds of friendships may provide a vital source of happiness and affirmation of personal identity. (p.103)

When asked to describe their friendships in abstract terms, the language the young people in this study used was indeed similar to that drawn upon by Pahl and others to characterise the 'pure relationship', emphasising complete openness and mutual disclosure. Nevertheless, as this chapter and the preceding chapters have demonstrated, there was a strong disjuncture between this language and the actual ways in which friendships were conducted and friends were 'managed' – at least in terms of conversations and decisions about HE. In practice, active and mutual trust, self-disclosure through talk, and opening oneself up to the other were all noticeably absent from the friendships of the young people. Indeed, this chapter and Chapter Four have both demonstrated that Pahl's contention that: 'between friends we talk about our futures, our ideals and larger-than-life meanings...there is an idealism in strong friendship because it is detached from the fixtures of role, status and custom' (p.113) fits uneasily with the experiences of the Emily Davies students.

The relatively small number of young people involved in this study does not provide a broad enough base upon which to develop a new theoretical understanding of friendship. However, I believe this chapter has shown that a functionalist conceptualisation of friendship does not adequately explain the ways in which the young people in this study managed their friendships over their two years at sixth-form college. Instead, I would support Lesko's (2001) assertion that the peer-orientation of young people has been over-stated in much of the literature on adolescent relationships. Far from using their friends as 'mirrors' to establish their own identity, or building fully open, honest and emotional 'pure relationships', the young people managed their friendships in highly pragmatic ways, aware of the tensions, difficulties and points of difference inherent in their social bonds.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the majority of the young people who took part in this study maintained very stable friendships during their two years at Emily Davies College. In part, this was supported by the way in which the college chose to organise the students: young people from the same feeder secondary school were often allocated to the same tutor group and in this way were able to consolidate existing friendships during 'college time'.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the young people themselves also played an important role in ensuring this stability.

Previous studies of friendship have emphasised the fluidity of such relationships, particularly when the social location of individuals changes and friends no longer perceive themselves to be socially equal. However, evidence from this study suggests that sociologists have tended to overstate the degree of change that follows from an awareness of growing difference and inequality. In this case, at least, friends employed a range of strategies to manage and maintain relationships that they recognised to be increasingly unequal. These included: avoiding HE-related topics of conversation; refusing to engage in such conversations when initiated by others; concealing decisions and choices; and misleading friends. The young people also chose confidantes on a purely pragmatic basis, often bypassing close friends in favour of another friend or peer whom they perceived to be more similar in some key aspect of the decision-making process. This allowed them to discuss specific aspects of their higher education decisions, while avoiding the difficulties that they feared such conversations would prompt if they had been held with close friends.

In seeking to explain the reason why the Emily Davies students employed such strategies, and were so concerned to maintain their existing friendships, I have proposed three possible theses. First, it could be argued that the differences and inequalities described at length in Chapters Four and Five were not of great importance to the young people and, for this reason, presented little threat to the equality of the friendship tie. However, this is not supported by the young people's accounts: many spoke clearly about mutual perceptions of inequality and the strains this had placed on their friendships. Their higher education choices were, patently, of great importance to them, not least because for many of the young people they were linked to emerging values, ideas about careers and lifestyle decisions.

A second, and more plausible explanation rests on the assumption that the differences and difficulties that the young people described when talking about their friendships, and the strategies they employed to manage these relationships, are not unique to them. Indeed, there is some, albeit limited, evidence that friendships at other points in the life-course are wrought with similar tensions. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence remains ambivalent – and theorising on the nature of friendship continues to emphasise the importance of perceived similarity, or ‘status homophily’.

Finally, I have suggested that the young people at Emily Davies College may have viewed their friendships as ‘transitional’ and have anticipated that change was inevitable on entry to higher education. This may have provided strong motivation to postpone any changes until they arrived at university or college – when making such changes would, anyway, be much less problematic due to the likely geographical separation of friends. This thesis is strongly supported by the data: almost all the young people envisaged substantial changes to their friendship networks during their time in higher education and subscribed to a very particular ideal of the university lifestyle. As such, I would argue that it represents the most plausible of the three theses. Nevertheless, further research is clearly needed to explore whether the kind of strategies so prevalent amongst the Emily Davies students are practised by others, and at other points in the life-course.

Debates about the nature of friendship are taken up again in the following chapter. Chapter Seven, the conclusion, draws together the various arguments that have been made about young people’s friendships in the course of this thesis and relates them to contemporary theorising. In addition, it uses the evidence presented in previous chapters to consider the ways in which young people ‘choose’ in higher education markets, the impact of friends and peers on this process, and some possible implications of these findings for education policy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN. CONCLUSION

### 7.1 Introduction

Over the past decade and a half, the notion of ‘choice’ has played an important rhetorical role in education policy. The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced a broad raft of measures aimed at increasing parental choice within compulsory schooling, while similar changes were brought about in the post-compulsory sector under the auspices of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Since then, although changes in government have resulted in some modifications to the way in which parental/pupil preferences are expressed and taken account of, ‘choice’ has remained an central plank of education policy under both Conservative and Labour administrations. However, despite this continuing commitment to increasing consumer choice within education, there is now a large body of research that has demonstrated that many of these policies have served to exacerbate social inequalities. For example, studies have shown that the ‘power to choose’ is not distributed equally across all social groups (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995), while in some areas, where there is high parental demand, it is the schools and colleges that often end up doing the ‘choosing’ (Whitty *et al.*, 1998) – in effect, what Tomlinson (2001) calls a ‘crude mechanism for social selection’ (p.49).

In drawing together themes from the previous chapters of the thesis, this chapter considers the ways in which young people ‘choose’ within higher education markets, the nature of their choices, and the reciprocal influences that educational choices may exert on other parts of young people’s lives. First, it considers the evidence about the role of friends and peers in students’ higher education decisions. It argues that while higher education choices may not be discussed explicitly with friends at any length, friends and peers do, nevertheless, play a critical role in the decision-making process. By informing a young person’s sense of self and position relative to others, they help to determine what is considered to be a ‘feasible’ university choice. The chapter then goes on to consider the extent to which the evidence from this study is consonant with sociological models of choice. It argues that although the language used by the young people may seem to reflect some of Beck’s and Giddens’ ideas about ‘individualization’, Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction provides a more adequate explanation for the processes of choice outlined in this thesis. While recognising the strength of Bourdieu’s model, the chapter also suggests that ‘transformations of habitus’

are under-theorised within his work and maintains that these may provide a useful focus for those keen to alter the social composition of universities and colleges.

The second part of the chapter looks more explicitly at young people's friendships and how these are affected by processes of educational choice. In contrast with recent theorising within the sociology of friendship, it argues that young people are able to maintain friendships that they perceive to be increasingly socially unequal, and that have little in common with the characteristics of the 'pure relationship'. It considers whether these patterns are likely to be replicated at other points in life or whether they are unique to young people at a 'transitional' stage of their lives. Finally, the chapter considers how this work may inform a future research agenda, and implications it may have for education policy.

## **7.2 Friendship and higher education choice**

### **7.2.1 The role of friends and peers**

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning of the literature on processes of higher education choice. As outlined in Chapter Two, research has explored effectively the impact of class and ethnicity on decisions made about university and college (for example: Ball *et al.*, 2002; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001b; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001), as well as that of different types of educational institution (Pugsley, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001a; Roker, 1993). However, within these otherwise wide-ranging studies there has been little consideration of the role played by friends and peers in young people's HE decisions. The only research that has specifically addressed the influence of students' informal networks (Connor *et al.*, 1999; Moogan *et al.*, 1999; Roberts and Allen, 1997) has employed a predominantly quantitative methodology. Thus, while it has given a useful measure of the proportion of young people who have discussed their HE choices with their friends, it has been unable to illuminate the content and length of such discussions, the number of friends with whom discussions were held, or the nature of the friendships of the young people in the sample. It has also been unable to engage with issues of influence. For example, while Roberts and Allen report that over 70 per cent of the 16-18 year olds in their sample had discussed their choice of subject and/or institution with their friends, it is clear that merely discussing choices with friends is not the same as influencing them or being influenced by them. This longitudinal, qualitative study explores the role of friends and peers in more depth and thus helps to contextualise such research.

### *The difficulty of discussing choices with friends*

In reflecting on his study of the social networks and leisure interests of middle class individuals, Savage (2000) notes that his respondents were hesitant to use the labels of social class because 'taking the label too seriously would undermine their main aspiration to be an individual agent, not programmed to act in any particular way' (p.113). Miles (2000) has also discussed the importance the young people in his research attributed to the *individual* nature of their actions (in this case, their patterns of consumption). Strong similarities emerged at Emily Davies College: the importance of 'individual choice' with respect to higher education choices was emphasised throughout the young people's narratives. Few believed that their friends had influenced their own choices in any way, and they clearly viewed any such influences in pejorative terms. Furthermore, in addition to this pervasive language of 'individualization', there was little evidence of any detailed discussion about universities or courses between friends. Very few of the young people had used their friends as a source of information about HE institutions and courses, or as a sounding board for emerging ideas.

However, as I have argued in Chapter Four, alongside the rhetoric about the importance of making an 'individual choice' was compelling evidence of the difficulty of talking about HE decisions with friends. Indeed, the young people's reluctance to discuss HE seemed to be strongly related to the differences in academic attainment and likely HE destination that were made explicit by such discussions, and the hierarchical way in which these differences were positioned. This hierarchical positioning served, in many cases, to undermine the perceived equality of the friendship tie and for this reason HE-related discussions were avoided. The elaborate strategies the young people devised to avoid talking about university (described in Chapter Six) provide further evidence to support the claim that they chose not to engage in these conversations, not out of a positive choice, but because such discussions were often extremely difficult. Although these findings are not necessarily inconsistent with Roberts and Allen's research, they do suggest that previous quantitative work in this area has masked the often problematic nature of discussions with friends about higher education decisions – as well as the complexity of peer influence.

### *The nature of friends' influence*

I claimed above that merely *discussing* one's choice of higher education subject and/or institution with friends is not synonymous with being influenced by friends. Similarly, the

absence of HE-related discussions cannot be equated simply with a *lack* of influence. Despite the young people's insistence on the 'individual' nature of their choices, their description of their friendships, their lives inside and outside of college, and their values provided strong evidence of the pivotal role played by their friends in the HE decision-making process. The nature of this influence was subtle and indirect and differs from both the instrumental role of friends, emphasised in much of the sociological literature on friendship, and the conformity to group norms, which is highlighted in various educational studies. Indeed, Chapter Five demonstrated how friends and the wider peer group provided the context in which the young people came to construct a 'hierarchy of students'. Through social and academic comparisons with others, they came to work out their own place on this emerging hierarchy. Rankings between friends were then transposed directly onto a similar hierarchy of HE institutions and courses, and determined what the young people considered to be a 'feasible' choice.

As mentioned above, this kind of influence differs from the instrumental role that is emphasised in many sociological studies of friendship. For example, in his study of the friendships of adults in the East End of London, Willmott (1987) argues that being able to turn to a particular person for help was seen as a key characteristic of friendship. However, in this study there was little evidence of friends playing an instrumental role with respect to higher education choices – and the difficulties of discussing HE choices militated against this type of influence. I have argued in Chapter Four that an additional reason why the young people did not turn to their friends and peers for advice was that, in most cases, they had access to alternative sources of information and support. Although few of the young people's parents had first-hand experience of higher education, several had amassed a considerable amount of knowledge from work colleagues and other sources (see Chapter Five), and even those with relatively little knowledge were keen to take part in the decision-making process. Thus, in terms of advice and practical help with applications, most of the young people in the sample (although not all) were able to draw on the resources of their families and, in some cases, their teachers. As a result, the instrumental role of friends was marginalized. I have suggested in Chapter Four that young people in other contexts, with families less willing and/or able to engage in the decision-making process, may place more weight on the information and advice that can be passed on by friends. Nevertheless, the two young women at Emily Davies College whose parents were not directly involved in their decisions showed no greater reliance on their friends than any other young person in the sample.



The impact of friends and peers on the Emily Davies students also differs considerably from the type of friend influence discussed in much educational research. Although relatively few studies have explored young people's educational choices within the context of their friendships and other informal relationships, those that have suggested that influence is exerted through young people's tendency to conform to peer group norms. Thus, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) argue that:

Choices are made that give credibility to the individual in the eyes of those around them of personal importance, particularly their peers....Understanding choice at such stages requires us to identify the value systems of the peer group with which an individual does, or would like to, live their personal life. (p.210)

However, this study argues that young people's higher education decisions can be read, not as a process of ensuring *similarities* with friends, but as a process of maintaining and/or creating *difference*. The Emily Davies students were concerned not necessarily to go to the same university as their friends, or even to the same type of university, but to an institution that reflected the way in which they differentiated themselves from those who were close to them. The basis of this differentiation was, to some extent, related to the social and cultural capital of the young people (and is discussed in section 7.2.2, below). Nonetheless, even amongst those with very similar social locations, family backgrounds and academic track records, maintaining fine-grained differences was of considerable importance. In this way, the 'mapping' processes central to their decision-making show strong parallels with the type of practices described by Savage (2000) in his discussion of working life in contemporary society. He argues that instead of comparing ourselves with those occupying very different social positions, as has often been the case in the past, the 'new model of individuality' (discussed in Chapter Four) has had the effect of diverting our gaze towards those who share many elements of our own social location. Instead of making vertical comparisons, our focus is now horizontal. He goes on to suggest that 'those close to you are also those you are most in competition with, and in some respects are those with respect to which you define yourself' (p.143). Thus, while there have been few other studies of the impact of young people's friends on processes of educational choices (and none concerned specifically with higher education choice), the similarities between the hierarchical ranking of friends highlighted by this study, and the competition amongst peers discussed by Savage suggest that the maintenance of difference between friends may be an increasingly common social

process.

In Chapter One I argued that a focus on informal relationships had helped to illuminate young people's decisions about their *post-16* decisions. Studies by Ball *et al.* (2000), Hodgkinson *et al.*, (1996) and Taylor (1992) have shown how young people's educational decisions are inextricably linked to their wider lifestyle choices – findings that have also been reflected in research from other countries (for example, Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). The research at Emily Davies College gives further support to this hypothesis. Moreover, it suggests that friends and peers play a direct and pivotal role in processes of educational choice. As I have demonstrated above, the young people's decisions about what, for them, constituted a 'feasible' choice of university and/or course were strongly related to their sense of their own social and academic position relative to friends and peers. Furthermore, by exploring the wider social context within which educational decisions are made, this research has demonstrated the complexity of processes of choice and, in particular, the reciprocal nature of some influences. Friends were certainly critical to the decisions young people made about HE institutions and degree subjects, but friendships themselves were also significantly affected by the decision-making process. This theme is taken up again in section 7.3, below.

### **7.2.2 Models of higher education choice**

In their study of higher education choice, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) identify various stages in the decision-making process. For example, they distinguish a decision to 'enter the game' from a final 'conversion' decision, in which choices of course and institution are entered on the student's UCAS form. Indeed, they argue that the former – decisions whether or not to enter HE – are taken at an early age, well before young people embark on their sixth-form studies. Amongst the Emily Davies students, ten of the fifteen had already decided that they wanted to go on to HE by the time they arrived at the college and, thus, their decision-making processes were concerned primarily with choosing a course and institution. There were five others, however, who were much more undecided about their post-18 plans, and were seriously considering alternatives to going on to university. This section argues that despite these different 'stages', the young people's choices can be explained in very similar ways. Thus, the influences that were exerted on a 'conversion' decision were not any different from those that affected a decision to 'enter the game'.

### *'Individualization' and HE choice*

As I noted above, throughout the period of research at Emily Davies College the young people emphasised the 'individual' nature of their decision-making processes and viewed any evidence of peer-influence on the decisions of others in clearly pejorative terms. Thus, the language they used to talk about their choices and the value they attached to making 'autonomous' decisions may appear to support the theory of 'individualization' proposed by theorists such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991). They assert that in contemporary society people's sense of individuality is constructed, not with respect to other people or social groups, but as a reaction to the loss of security inherent in a de-traditionalized, globalized world system. Further, they maintain that the capacity of individuals to reflexively construct their own biographies shows a strong disjuncture with ideas about traditional class identities. However, as I argued in Chapters Four and Five, the young people's decisions were, in many ways, heavily dependent on both their families (in terms of their attitudes towards the importance of the status of HE courses and institutions, and the way in which they categorized HEIs) and their friends (in terms of their sense of self relative to others, and in judgements about what represented a 'feasible' higher education choice). Although HE decisions may not have been discussed in any detailed way with close friends, nor influenced by a desire to conform to group norms, they were, nevertheless, strongly related to the young people's perception of their own social or 'academic' position relative to others. It was this positioning that appeared to make discussions about HE difficult and provides the most convincing explanation of why the young people did not discuss their HE choices with others.

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) claim that the increasing emphasis on the individual nature of decisions in contemporary society has obscured underlying and continuing class relationships – what they describe as the 'epistemological fallacy of late modernity' (p.5). As I argued in Chapter Four, this term has resonance within the present study: taking the young people's claims about the importance of 'individual choices' at face value may serve to obscure the tensions inherent in many of their friendships. Moreover, although the young people's social position did not obviously 'unite' them in many ways, it was of crucial importance – primarily in terms of how they differentiated themselves from others. Indeed, the findings of this research seem to support Savage's (2000) contention that class is implicit, encoded in people's sense of self-worth and in their attitudes to and awareness of others, and that 'rather than evoking a sense of belonging to a collective group, it invokes a sense of differentiation

from others' (p.115).

### *Cultural reproduction and HE choice*

Although the Emily Davies students made frequent use of the language of individualization in talking about their HE choices, a more convincing explanation of their decision-making processes is provided by Bourdieu's concept of habitus and the theory of cultural reproduction that this informs. As outlined in Chapter Five, the ways in which the young people constructed their hierarchies of HE institutions and courses showed an extremely close correspondence with the perceptions, values and experience of their parents and step-parents – supporting Bourdieu's assertion that cultural capital is transmitted through the family via implicit and deeply internalised values. In outlining his theory of cultural reproduction (discussed in more detail in Chapter Two), Bourdieu also emphasises the central role of the educational institution in perpetuating class inequalities. He argues that by failing to take into account the cultural inequalities between students from different social groups, schools and colleges effectively transform *social* advantages into *educational* advantages. Indeed, he claims that 'the formal equality which governs pedagogical practice is in fact a cloak for and a justification of indifference to the real inequalities with regard to the body of knowledge taught or rather demanded' (1976, p.113). Although here Bourdieu is referring specifically to pedagogical techniques, his argument seems equally applicable to the provision of careers advice within educational institutions. Perpetuating the myth that all universities are perceived as equal within the labour market can only serve to disadvantage those from families with little cultural capital, who may be relatively ignorant of the reputation of particular universities and colleges. This complicity on the behalf on the college was evident throughout the research at Emily Davies College: in very few cases did teachers or careers advisers discuss in any explicit way the advantages in terms of future labour market destination associated with attending a high status university (beyond Oxbridge).

In addition to outlining the impact of family and educational institution on the young people's understanding of the HE market, Chapter Five has also shown clearly the ways in which the young people's sense of their own position relative to others – and thus what they considered to be a 'feasible' HE choice for them – was underpinned by a variety of social factors. The correlation between a young person's actual academic performance (as quantified through exam grades and marks in tests) and their confidence in their own

academic ability seemed strongly related to the amount of cultural capital possessed by their families. In this way the supposed meritocratic ranking of friends was distorted by what Bourdieu termed 'subjective expectations of objective probabilities'. Both the 'hierarchies of students' and the 'hierarchies of HEIs' discussed in the chapter were thus strongly patterned by the students' social locations.

However, this research has also highlighted a number of social processes that do not seem to be adequately explained by Bourdieu's notion of a durable habitus, or the mechanisms of his theory of cultural reproduction. First, it appears that several of the social processes that distorted the relationship between the ranking of friends and their actual attainment cannot be explained on the basis of social class alone – and thus not in terms of Bourdieu's theorising. For example, as Chapter Five outlined, extreme levels of competitiveness within one friendship group had a profound impact on the young people's perceptions of their own academic ability and, consequently, upon their HE choices. Processes such as these seem to be more adequately explained by Walkerdine *et al.*'s (2001) psychosocial theories and/or Savage's (2000) thesis of increasing 'horizontal' differentiation – a growing competitiveness between peers who share the same class position. Second, the differences between some of the young people from a similar social location may suggest ways in which the young people and their parents were actively attempting to change their habitus. I have argued in Chapter Two that Bourdieu's description of habitus indicates that it is extremely durable and impervious to change. Despite an acknowledgement that at 'times of crisis', when an adjustment between objective and subjective structures may be needed, the habitus may have a transformative rather than a reproductive role, his writings contain no account of the actual ways in which habitus may develop or be transformed; emphasis remains primarily on its reproductive role. In contrast, several families in this study seemed to have effected substantial intergenerational change. Amongst the sample, very few of the young people came from families with any experience of HE. Nonetheless, several had developed an acute understanding of status differences between HE institutions and courses, and this had underpinned their decision-making processes. For some, this had also led them to adopt specific (and largely successful) strategies to maximise their chances of gaining entry to a high status institution or course. In Chapter Five, I suggested that some of these differences between the young people may be explained by the specific contexts in which their parents worked and/or their (self-) identification as 'high achievers' early on in their schooling.

I argued in Chapter Two that the modifications to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction made by researchers such as Reay (1998b, 1998c) and Hodkinson (1996, 1997) offer a more satisfactory explanation of significant elements of social mobility within a largely reproductive educational system. The evidence outlined in Chapter Five, and discussed above, lends further support to this position. The understanding of the HE market reached by some of the families in this study who had no university experience of their own upon which to draw, and the detailed strategies a few young people put in place to gain a place at a high status university or on a high status course, have much in common with the attempts to transform habitus evident among some of the mothers in Reay's study. Equally, the 'turning points' central to Hodkinson's concept of 'careership' were also apparent in this study. Chapter Five described how, for some young people, their (self-) identification as 'high achievers' early on in their schooling had been key to their HE choices; while for others, the specific job held by one of their parents had changed their understanding of the hierarchical structure of the HE sector. Bourdieu does not, of course, deny the possibility of social mobility in contemporary society, or that effecting substantial change in a person's habitus is possible. Indeed, he argues that those who 'escape the fate of their class' are essential to processes of cultural reproduction. They give the impression that it is possible for all to be socially mobile if they are sufficiently talented and motivated, and thus support what he sees as the myth of education as a liberating force. While the enduring nature of social inequalities within the HE sector, which were outlined in Chapters One and Two, suggests that such 'transformations of habitus' are not commonplace, it would seem that these changes warrant further investigation if the social composition of universities and colleges is to be altered in any significant way.

### *Middle class processes of choice*

As I emphasised in Chapter Three, most of the recent research on HE choice has explored the decisions made by young people from working class backgrounds (Hutchings and Archer, 2001) and/or those from middle class families with a prior history of degree-level study (David *et al.*, 2001a). In contrast, this research has focussed largely on young people from the lower middle class, whose parents have not gone on to higher education. Although I have suggested above that there were significant differences between young people with the same (lower middle) class location, this thesis has also argued that many of the common assumptions about middle class processes of educational choice do not fit easily with the experiences of the Emily Davies students. For example, relatively few of the families in this

study seemed to have been engaged in the strategic pursuit of educational advantage that is assumed by some recent theorising (Ball and Vincent, 2001). Furthermore, the behaviour of some of the young people in the sample was more similar to that routinely portrayed as working class rather than middle class: many were very conscious of the considerable differences between their own educational pathway and that taken by their parents (and, for some, this was accompanied by feelings of guilt); and few had assumed their progression to HE as an automatic right. The disparities between the narratives of the largely lower middle class students in this research and the descriptions of middle class assumptions and motivations presented in previous studies of HE choice (see, for example, Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001) suggest that further research is needed to explore the diversity of processes of choice within the middle class.

### **7.2.3 Suggestions for further research**

In addition to exploring further the different ways in which young people from different fractions of the middle class may engage with educational markets, it may be useful to investigate whether some of the processes of choice that emerged during the research at Emily Davies College are also evident in other institutional contexts. For example, at Emily Davies College, familial habitus was central to the ways in which the young people came to understand the HE market. However, the strength of this family influence may have been related to the relative weakness of the institutional habitus – explained by the large size of the college, its disparate culture and the mixed messages about the reputations of universities and colleges that emanated from teachers and careers advisers. Thus, it would be useful to explore whether similar hierarchies of HEIs develop in schools and colleges with a stronger institutional culture and/or a smaller student body. Similarly, as I have explained in Chapters Three and Six, the way in which Emily Davies College chose to group the young people – allocating large groups of students from the same feeder secondary school to the same tutor group – may have provided them with less incentive to make new friends than if they had been split into new tutor groups on arrival at the college. Again, it would be interesting to explore whether young people in other institutional contexts go to the same lengths to preserve what they perceive to be increasingly unsatisfactory relationships.

Secondly, as I have discussed in Chapter Four, few of the Emily Davies students had any experience of processes of educational selection before entering the college: most had attended their local secondary school and then moved on to Emily Davies College with a

large number of school friends. Furthermore, few of the young people involved in this research had had any problems meeting the criteria for entry to the college or studying the subjects they wished to pursue at A Level. It is thus possible that young people located in other educational markets could have had much more exposure to processes of educational selection earlier in their lives through, for example, sitting entrance exams for private schools or the '11 plus' exam for entry to grammar schools. Indeed, research into educational markets has highlighted the ways in which processes of choice are often related to the characteristics of a specific market (Ball *et al.*, 2000). Thus, future research could usefully explore whether the methods of comparing, ranking and mapping amongst peers, which have been highlighted in this study, are as evident amongst young people who have had prior experience of educational selection, and whose friendships may already be closely structured by an awareness of academic difference.

### **7.3 The practice of friendship in late modernity**

As has been suggested throughout this thesis, the research at Emily Davies College does not engage solely with debates about educational choice; it also explores ways in which friendship is practised by young people. It considers the way in which the Emily Davies students managed their friendships over the two-year period of the study and, in particular, the extent to which their informal relationships were consonant with the models of friendship developed within both sociology and psychology.

#### **7.3.1 Equal friendships?**

Much of the theorising within the sociology of friendship over recent decades has highlighted the importance of equality to such relationships. Friends, it is argued, typically share the same social location, or at least perceive their social location to be similar (Allan, 1998; Jerrome, 1984). When perceptions of equality are no longer possible, due perhaps to changes in the circumstances of one of the friends, Allan (1998) argues that relationships are likely to break down as people seek new friends whom they perceive as more socially equal. Within this model of friendship, fluidity is stressed, change is considered routine and perceptions of equality are held to be central. However, on the basis of this research, it would seem that in some circumstances at least, friends are able to maintain what they perceive to be increasingly unequal relationships. In Chapter Four, I argued that the process of making choices about higher education and, perhaps for the first time, becoming aware of significant



differences in future educational destinations highlighted disparities in the likely future social location of friends. The young people spoke clearly about the importance of these differences that had emerged between them and their friends. Nevertheless, despite these considerable differences and their obvious importance to the young people in the study, few of them made any changes to their close friends over the two-year period of the study. Indeed, Chapter Six provided compelling evidence of the various strategies the Emily Davies students employed to manage friendships that they perceived to be increasingly unequal. These included: avoiding topics of conversation related to higher education; refusing to engage in such conversations when initiated by others; concealing decisions; and misleading friends. They also chose confidantes on a purely pragmatic basis, often bypassing close friends in favour of another friend or peer whom they perceived to be more similar to them in some key aspect of the decision-making process. This allowed them to discuss specific aspects of their higher education decisions, while avoiding the difficulties they feared such conversations would prompt if they were held with close friends. However, in contrast to previous studies (for example, Suitor, 1987), in no cases did these confidantes become close friends; it appeared that they were used merely as another method of managing unequal relationships with existing friends.

I suggested in Chapter Six that it is possible to argue that the young people's ability to maintain increasingly unequal friendships can be explained by the relatively low priority that they accorded to educational decisions and destinations. Thus, although the educational pathways of friends may have diverged, they continued to share other important parts of their lives, and these common pursuits ensured that they persisted in seeing one another as social equals. In this way, the differences and inequalities outlined in Chapters Four and Five would present no substantial threat to the equality of the friendship. However, although this may seem a plausible argument, it is not supported by the young people's accounts: many spoke clearly about mutual perceptions of inequality and the strains these had placed on their friendships. Their higher education decisions were, patently, of great importance to them, not least because, for many young people, they were linked to emerging values, ideas about careers and lifestyle decisions. A second possible explanation for the young people's desire and ability to maintain unequal friendships rests on the assumption that the differences and difficulties that characterised many of their friendships also structure adult friendships. This would suggest that far from resembling the 'pure relationship' (discussed below), friendships throughout the life course might be subject to similar tensions and are managed through

similar pragmatic compromises. This explanation is necessarily tentative, given that the present study focussed exclusively on the friendships of young people. Nevertheless, as the empirical evidence about adult friendships remains ambivalent on this point, further research is needed to explore whether the difficulties and tensions endemic in the young people's friendships are experienced at other points in life. Thirdly, I have suggested that the strategies employed by the young people at Emily Davies College may be explained by their location at a specific point in the transition to adulthood. It is possible that the young people may have viewed their friendships as 'transitional' and have anticipated that change was inevitable on entry to higher education (this is discussed further in section 7.3.3, below). As I have argued in Chapter Six, this may have provided strong motivation to postpone any changes to their friends until they arrived at university. This thesis is strongly supported by the data: almost all the young people envisaged substantial changes to their friendship networks during their time in higher education and most subscribed to a very particular ideal of the university lifestyle.

### **7.3.2 Pure relationships?**

As I suggested in Chapter One, debates about the 'pure relationship' have recently assumed an important place within the sociology of friendship. Within this literature, less emphasis is placed upon 'status homophily' or a shared social location than in the studies discussed above. Instead, theorists such as Beck (1992), Giddens (1992, 1999) and Pahl (1998, 2000) argue that the conditions of late modernity allow us greater freedom and choice concerning with whom we form close relationships. Pure relationships are argued to be those that are entered into for their own sake, maintained only for as long as they continue to bring satisfaction to both parties, and based on openness and emotional disclosure. Within the terms of this conceptualisation of friendship, sharing of life plans assumes an important role (Pahl, 1998). It would be expected therefore, that if the friendships of the young people in this study resembled 'pure relationships', openness about and disclosure of higher education plans would play a significant part in the practice of their friendships.

However, as Chapter Four has shown, very few of the Emily Davies students discussed their deliberations about the universities and courses they were thinking of applying to at any length with their close friends. This was apparent throughout their two years at sixth-form college, and applied equally to: young men and young women; relatively high achievers and relatively low achievers; and members of all the friendship groups involved in the research.

Although most of the young people did tell at least some of their friends where they were applying and for what subject, this was generally after they had completed their UCAS forms and thus when most decisions had already been taken. Prolonged discussion of potential options was notably absent from the friendships of these young people. As discussed above, the young people found such discussions very difficult because of the differences they highlighted. Indeed, Chapter Six has illustrated clearly the efforts to which they went to avoid talking about their higher education choices with their friends.

Thus, in this respect, it seems that this study offers little support for the claim that late modernity has witnessed the emergence of a new form of friendship, one that is predicated upon openness, disclosure and the sharing of life plans. While educational decisions were patently of great importance to almost all of the young people involved in this study, few of them were prepared to share their deliberations about HE or plans for the future with their close friends in ways that would be consonant with a 'pure relationship'. Similarly, the effort they exerted in maintaining friendships that they recognised to be increasingly socially unequal and, for some, clearly unsatisfactory, raises questions about the emphasis on fluidity and change within the conceptualisation of the pure relationship. Critiques of the pure relationship have generally been based upon evidence of strong and enduring social divisions highlighted by empirical studies of friendship. Jamieson (1998), for example, claims that friendship continues to be structured by the norms of heterosexuality, as well as the constraints of class and ethnicity. Thus, it is her contention that friendship in late modernity is little different from friendships practised at previous points in time. However, on the basis of this study, it would appear that the emphasis on complete disclosure within theorisation of the pure relationship also fits uneasily with evidence of how friendships are actually practised.

In Chapter Six and in the preceding section of this chapter, I have discussed the extent to which young people's friendships resemble those forged at other points in the life course. Many studies within both social psychology and education have maintained that the friendships of children and young people are qualitatively different from those formed by adults. Although I have argued in Chapter Six that there is some evidence of tensions, difficulties and differences being pragmatically managed at other points in the life-course, I have also suggested that the perceived 'transitional' nature of young people's experiences at sixth-form college may have some bearing on the way in which they played out their

friendships. In particular, the emphasis on preparing for the future which pervades much of the sixth-form experience may encourage young people to postpone any attempts to form more emotionally satisfying friendships until they reach what they perceive to be a more stable and 'permanent' phase of their lives. Thus, it may be the case that the increased choice of who to form friendships with, and the centrality of openness and disclosure – both central to the ideal of the pure relationship – are easier to achieve as an adult than a young person. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the experience of misleading friends, concealing important decisions from them, and actively 'managing' friendships over a prolonged period of time may be carried over into adulthood; these may be the patterns to which young people expect all friendships to conform. The present study can shed little light on these speculations, and further research is clearly needed to explore whether the pragmatic way the young people managed their unequal friendships is replicated in adulthood.

### **7.3.3 Adolescent friendships?**

As I outlined in Chapter One, within the social psychological literature and many studies of education there is a clear assumption that the friendships of adolescents differ markedly from friendships forged later in life. It is claimed that in adolescence, friends and peers provide crucial psychological support for young people as they pass through a 'transitional' stage of their lives – becoming less dependent on their families and establishing their own identities and values (Duck, 1983; Erwin, 1998; Hendry *et al.*, 1993). Such studies assert that the degree of intimacy characteristic of these adolescent friendships is rarely mirrored in friendships forged later in life. In contrast, recent theorising within sociology – and particularly in relation to the 'pure relationship' – has emphasised the important continuities between the friendships of children, adolescents and adults. For example, Giddens (1992) argues that pure relationships are as relevant to bonds between parent and child as they are to adult couples. Indeed, he maintains that within contemporary society 'it is the quality of the relationship that comes to the fore, with a stress upon intimacy replacing that of parental authoritativeness' (p.98).

As will be evident from the preceding discussion, the extent to which generalization is possible about both the prevalence of 'unequal' friendships and the absence of 'pure relationships' is related to assumptions about the degree of similarity or difference between adolescent friendships and those made in adulthood. In some respects, this research has suggested that there may well be strong continuities between friendships established at

different points of the life-course. For example, there was little evidence of direct forms of peer pressure and conformity to group norms – often argued to be a distinguishing feature of young people’s friendships – in this study. Few of the young people became interested in particular HE courses or institutions primarily because their friends were thinking of applying there. Indeed, the relative absence of conversations about HE destinations militated against this kind of influence. Similarly, while friends and peers did play an important role in HE decisions, the mechanisms through which this was affected do not seem to be particularly age-specific. Furthermore, as I have indicated above, there is evidence that similar processes – comparing, ranking and hierarchical positioning between friends – are conducted by adults in the workplace (Savage, 2000). This suggests that the competitive pressures the young people experienced during their time at sixth-form college, and their consciousness of their positioning relative to friends, were not related specifically to their age or their particular position on an educational trajectory.

However, this thesis has also presented other evidence to suggest that, while the competitive pressures experienced by young people may not be age-specific, there may be other factors that cause young people to respond to these pressures in ways that may be very different from adults. First, I have argued in Chapter Six and also in section 7.2.1 that the proximity of the transition to HE may itself have caused them to postpone making any changes to their friends. For most of the young people in this study, entering HE represented not only an ‘educational’ change but also a ‘lifestyle’ transition. Almost all of the Emily Davies students anticipated living away from home during their time at university, and many of them planned to move to a new area where they knew very few other people. Given that most of them hoped to develop new friendship networks during their time at university, and had high expectations of such relationships, forging more satisfactory friendships during their time at sixth-form college may have seemed unnecessary. While adults do also obviously experience periods of significant change in their lives, it is possible to argue that the transition to HE constitutes a particularly profound change and one that is often accompanied by significant changes to living arrangements, lifestyle and friendship networks. Furthermore, for many young people, it is often also a long-anticipated change, with many children being clear about whether or not they want to go on to university by Year 6 (Hemsley-Brown and Foskett, 1997). This may also differentiate it from other periods of change later in life.

I have also suggested, in Chapter Six, that the way in which adolescence is culturally constructed in contemporary society may have encouraged the young people to postpone making changes to their friendship networks. The emphasis on preparing for the future, which has pervaded our understanding of ‘youth’ (Lesko, 2001), may have provided further motivation to tolerate unsatisfactory friendships – at least until entry to higher education. This may give further support for the argument that the circumstances that underpin a decision to ‘postpone’ changes to friendships and tolerate unsatisfactory relationships are unlikely to be replicated at many other points in life. Thus, it may be the context in which these friendships are practised, rather than anything intrinsic to the friendships themselves, which distinguishes them from ‘adult’ friendships.

### **7.3.4 Suggestions for further research**

At several points in this section I have speculated about the degree of continuity between the friendships of young people and those forged by adults, at later points in life. Indeed, I have indicated that the extent to which it is possible to generalize about both the prevalence of ‘unequal’ friendships and the absence of pure relationships is dependent on assumptions about the degree of similarity between friendships made in adolescence and in adulthood. However, this research is based solely on fieldwork with young people between the ages of 16 and 18. As such, it can make no firm claims about the extent to which unsatisfactory relationships are maintained in adulthood, or about the degree of disclosure that characterises adult friendships. Comparing the ways friendships at different points in the life-course are played out would help to explore some of these ideas, and I consider this to be a fruitful direction for future research.

## **7.4 Policy implications**

In Chapter One I outlined various changes to the higher education system over recent years. I also described the Labour government’s commitment to HE reform and suggested that it was driven by two main concerns: to increase the economic competitiveness of the country and to build a more equal and inclusive society. Given this focus on HE as a driver of both economic and social change, it seems useful to relate some of the findings of the research at Emily Davies College to this wider policy context.

First, it raises questions about some of the assumptions upon which the government’s

‘widening participation’ programme is predicated. Policy in this area (along with many other of the ‘liberal’ discourses discussed in Chapter Two) tends to assume a ‘rational’ model of decision-making, in which individuals make choices only after reviewing a wide range of relevant evidence and considering how best to maximise their own utility. However, it would appear that the ways in which young people construct hierarchies of higher education institutions and then determine what, for them, represents a ‘feasible’ choice (as discussed in Chapter Five) cannot be adequately explained by this model. While there were certainly a small number of young people who approached their higher education decisions very strategically and, as I have argued above, attempted to transform their ‘habitus’, the choices of the majority of the Emily Davies students were strongly patterned by their social location – through the ways they categorized higher education institutions and/or courses and the comparisons they made between themselves and their peers. This suggests that unless interventions are made very early in a young person’s schooling, they are unlikely to have any significant effect. By concentrating only on secondary school pupils and those in post-compulsory education, initiatives such as the ‘Excellence Challenge’ and ‘Aim Higher’ (both discussed in Chapter One) may be failing to tackle deep-seated differences in young people’s perceptions of both the HE system and their own position relative to peers.

Second, the research may also have implications for the way in which careers education and guidance is delivered (in schools and colleges and/or under the auspices of the new ‘Connexions Service’). Contrary to some of the assumptions that are made about the role of friends in popular university guides and some careers guidance material, my research would suggest that it is unwise to assume that friends and peers offer an effective method of disseminating information about higher education courses or institutions. As Chapter Four has demonstrated, friends rarely discussed their university choices in any detail, largely because of the differences such conversations highlighted, and in only a few cases did the young people cite their friends as direct sources of information about HE. This may indicate that teachers and careers/personal advisers cannot assume a ‘cascade’ model of information flow, even between close friends. It also suggests that any careers activities in schools and colleges based on group work or discussions with peers may be very difficult for young people because of the tensions between friends that such conversations appear to exacerbate.

This research also raises questions about the model of choice that is used within careers education and guidance. As other studies have noted (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001;

Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996), most careers guidance continues to operate within either a framework of 'personality matching' (students select careers that are consistent with their personalities) or a 'developmental' framework (students progress through a number of linear stages to the point at which they can make realistic choices about the future). These approaches assume that if young people's access to information about HE improves, they will make 'better' choices about their post-18 destinations. However, as discussed above, this research has provided clear evidence of the socially-embedded nature of decision-making processes. The ways in which young people use information, and the weighting they give to different aspects of higher education institutions and/or courses seem strongly related to the social position of their families. Furthermore, the mixed messages given out by teachers and careers advisers at Emily Davies College – about the importance of institutional status, for example – suggests that an important component of careers education and guidance may be to encourage young people to question more critically the advice and images they receive. Indeed, as Fosskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) note, any form of guidance is itself the product of that individual's own personal perceptions. Making this more explicit, and also discussing in more direct ways the relationship between social location and educational choice may encourage young people to question some of their assumptions about higher education.

The Connexions Service, launched in April 2000, with the intention of streamlining the services of the careers service, youth service and a range of other specialist agencies in a more integrated and 'joined up' manner, may offer the possibility of tackling some of these socially-embedded constraints to going on to HE and to accessing high status institutions. Indeed, the increased breadth and depth of the new service has been welcomed (Roberts, 2000). However, the corollary of this move to a more holistic approach is that advisers' knowledge of any one particular section of the education system or labour market is likely to be diluted. Indeed, not all advisers have been trained to provide careers guidance (Watts, 2001). Furthermore, the reliance on one particular personal adviser – central to the Connexions model – may make it harder for young people to critically question the advice they are given, in the ways suggested above. Finally, the large projected case-loads of the personal advisers and the prioritising of those most at risk of being excluded from learning and employment (*ibid.*), suggest that the relative academic success of young people like those at Emily Davies College may preclude them from any sustained contact with the Connexions Service. This pattern of resource allocation may well serve to further the government's social



inclusion agenda, but this may be at the expense of its aim to widen participation in higher education.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has drawn together themes from the two-year, qualitative study of young people at Emily Davies College and related them to current debates about friendship and higher education choice, which have been conducted within the disciplines of sociology, education and, to a lesser extent, social psychology. It has argued that friends and peers *do* play an important role in young people's higher education choices, although the nature of this influence is subtle, implicit and rarely exerted through direct discussions of post-18 options. By providing the context for a number of academic and social comparisons, friends informed a young person's sense of self and position relative to others. This position was then effectively 'mapped' onto a hierarchy of higher education institutions and/or courses and helped to determine what was seen as a 'feasible' HE choice. This chapter has also suggested that this 'mapping process' is largely consonant with Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction. Nevertheless, it has also highlighted a number of ways in which young people with no family experience of higher education were attempting to change their 'habitus' and has gone on to argue that, although such transformations are under-theorised within Bourdieu's model, they may provide a useful focus for the government's aim of widening participation.

The evidence from the Emily Davies students demonstrates clearly the impact of their social location on their HE choices. However, it also illustrates the reciprocal influence that educational decisions may exert on young people's relationships. Indeed, this chapter has emphasised the significant differences between friends that were brought into sharp relief by the higher education decision-making process. Furthermore, in contrast to much recent theorising, it has suggested that young people are able to maintain friendships that they recognise to be increasingly socially unequal and which have little in common with the characteristics of the 'pure relationship'. By focussing on both the impact of friends on young people's HE decisions, and the reciprocal influence that educational decisions may exert on friendships, this study has shown the value of documenting carefully the 'lived experiences' of individuals and groups engaging with specific educational markets. The narratives of the Emily Davies students suggest that a narrow focus on only the influences on

educational decisions may underplay the significance of the decision-making process itself in the lives of young people and, in particular, it may overlook the considerable impact such processes may have on relationships with friends and peers. It would seem that furthering our understanding of HE choice is partially dependent on understanding the significance and impact of such decisions in the wider lives of young people, and this research represents a contribution towards this important goal.

## APPENDIX 1

### INFORMATION ABOUT EMILY DAVIES COLLEGE

#### 1. General information

- Annual intake: 800-900 students
- Number of students entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance/Learner Support in 1999-2001 cohort: 120
- Proportion of students from ethnic minority backgrounds: five per cent

#### 2. Examination results during period of fieldwork (1999-2001)

	1999	2000	2001
Number of second-year students entered for two or more A/AS Levels	696	605	750
Average A/AS point score per student (for second years entered for two or more A/AS Levels)	17.8	16.7	16.0
Number of second-year students entered for Advanced GNVQ	73	51	97
Average Advanced GNVQ point score per student	11.5	11.5	12.6

Source: DfES

### 3. Post-18 destinations of students (1999-2001)

	1999	2000	2001
Application via UCAS	526	405	527
Further Education (at Emily Davies College)	9	33	41
Other Further Education	15	26	31
Employment	118	144	187
Gap Year (no university place)	information not collected	information not collected	58
Unemployed	0	0	1
Unknown / not placed	127	117	66

Source: Emily Davies College

#### 4. Higher education destinations of students (1999-2001)

##### a. institutions

Institution	1999	2000	2001
Southampton Institute	69	49	73
Portsmouth University	50	24	62
Southampton University	41	32	40
Bournemouth University	25	23	35
King Alfred's College	15	23	27
Winchester School of Art	13	20	24
University of Wales (Cardiff)	-	20	16
Exeter University	-	9	14
Plymouth University	-	7	13
University of Sussex	-	2	10
UCL	-	2	10
Chichester Institute of HE	6	9	9
Oxford Brookes	-	2	8
University of Reading	-	5	10
Brighton	-	7	7
Brunel	-	6	7
UWE	-	20	7
Bristol	-	8	6
Oxford	-	5	6
Warwick	-	4	6

Source: Emily Davies College

**b. subjects**

Subject	1999	2000	2001
Business / Marketing / Management / Accounting and Finance	80	37	71
Art Foundation	-	51	59
Maths / Computing / IT	40	32	36
Media / Film / Communication	20	15	33
Law	30	22	32
Science other (inc. Physiotherapy nursing etc)	46	29	30
PE/Leisure/Tourism	21	31	26
English / Linguistics	16	10	16
Psychology	4	4	15
Engineering	20	20	14
Languages	5	8	11
Sociology	11	4	11
Drama / Theatre	-	-	12
Economics	4	3	10
Geography	9	8	9
Design (not Foundation)	42	14	9
Medicine / Vet / Dentistry	6	5	8
American Studies	-	-	8
Biology	9	5	7
Classics / Archaeology	5	2	6
Music / Music Tech	-	-	5
Chemistry	1	0	5
Physics	8	3	5
Architecture	-	-	4
Philosophy / RE	8	4	2
Other / combined	-	-	26

Source: Emily Davies College

## APPENDIX 2

### THE HIGHER EDUCATION APPLICATIONS OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO TOOK PART IN THE RESEARCH

Name	Predicted grades at time of application	Subject(s) applied for	UCAS choices (including (i) - firm choice and (ii) - insurance choice) and offers/rejections		Final destination (and actual A Level grades)
Becky	AAAA	history	(i) Oxford (ii) Exeter Bristol Cardiff Nottingham Southampton	AAB ABB rejected BBC BBB ABB	Oxford (AAB)
Charlotte	AAA	law	(i) Southampton (ii) University of the West of England Birmingham Cardiff Coventry Nottingham	ABB  BBC AAB ABB CCD she rejected	Southampton (AAB)
Clare	BCC	accountancy	(i) Brighton (ii) University of the West of England Bournemouth Portsmouth Southampton Institute South Bank	18 points  16 points 18 points 14 points DD CC	Brighton (BCD)
Jenny	Left Emily Davies College at the end of the first year. Transferred to another local college in September 2001 to retake Advanced GNVQ. Was asked to leave the college in June 2001. Enrolled at local college of further education in September 2002 to take a secretarial course. At time of the final interview hoped to get a job as a medical secretary when she finished her course.				
Jim	CC/DC	physics/ physics and management	(i) Sussex (ii) Surrey Hertfordshire Hertfordshire Reading Staffordshire	DE CC CC CC DD course cancelled	Sussex (DDD)

Liz	ABC	criminology and/with sociology	(i) Portsmouth (ii) Middlesex Buckingham East London Luton South Bank	could not remember specific offers – thought they were all around 14 points	Portsmouth (BCD)
Lucy	ABC	public relations/ marketing/ advertising	(i) Bournemouth (ii) Bournemouth Birmingham Leeds Luton	ABC ABC rejected BBC CCC	Bournemouth (deferred place until October 2002) (ABC)
Mark	CCC	American studies/media studies	(i) Brunel (ii) Cheltenham and Gloucester Chichester Christ Church Canterbury De Montfort East Anglia	CCC  CC rejected  CCC CC rejected	Brunel (ADN)
Paul	ABBB	law/law and politics	(i) Southampton (ii) Cardiff Exeter Hull Nottingham	ABB BBB ABB BCC rejected	Southampton (ABCE)
Rich	Left Emily Davies College in December 2000. Carried on with business studies A Level at night school (gained a grade E). Did not apply to university – at time of final interview was hoping to join the police force.				
Sarah	BBC	creative writing/ English literature/ English and education	(i) Bath Spa (ii) University of the West of England Chester King Alfred's King Alfred's Reading	BB  BBC BBB 14 points 14 points BBB	Bath Spa (CCD)
Simon	ABB	history and politics	(i) Warwick (ii) Cardiff Edinburgh Exeter LSE York	28 points 22 points rejected 28 points rejected rejected	Cardiff (deferred place until October 2002) (BBD)
Steve	BBC	politics/East European studies	(i) UCL Cardiff Hull Lancaster Oxford Brookes Queen Mary and Westfield (no insurance choice)	BCC BBC BBC BBC BBB  BBB	UCL (CCD)



Sunita	BCC	maths with statistics/ economics/ finance/ operational research	(i) Southampton (ii) Surrey Cardiff Hull Southampton Swansea	BBC BBC BBB BBC BBB BBC	Swansea (ACE)
Zoë	AAAA	medicine	(i) Southampton Bristol Cardiff Sheffield (no insurance choice)	ABB rejected rejected rejected	Southampton (AABB)

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **FRIENDSHIP GROUPS INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH**

#### **Mark, Rich and Steve**

On entry to Emily Davies College, Mark, Rich and Steve were part of a friendship group that they described as the ‘Townfield lads’. There were about nine members of this group and they had all attended the same boys’ school, been friends for several years and socialised together out of college. Mark, Rich and Steve, as well as some others of the group, were allocated to the same tutor group at Emily Davies College. During the first year of their A Level studies, Rich made some new friends – who were more interested in the ‘arts’ than the Townfield lads – and spent an increasing proportion of time with them. Mark and Steve, however, continued to be close friends throughout the two years and reported few changes within the wider friendship group.

#### **Charlotte and Zoë**

At the beginning of the project, Charlotte and Zoë described each other as one of their closest friends. They had both attended the same secondary school and initially put great emphasis on their similarity – in terms of GCSE grades, A Level subjects and even their birthdays. They were part of a close friendship group of about six young women, all of whom had been friends at secondary school. They had moved to Emily Davies College together. Most of them were allocated to the same tutor group on entry to the college. All had very high GCSE grades and both Charlotte and Zoë thought that their high level of academic achievement was one of the most important things that they shared. During the two years at college differences did emerge within the group, both academically and in terms of career ambitions. However, Charlotte and Zoë described the changes differently: Charlotte felt that most members of the friendship group had remained close, while Zoë believed that she had moved away from the group, becoming closer to new friends within her subject classes.

#### **Jenny and Sunita**

Jenny and Sunita were close friends at the beginning of the research and spent their free periods together – either as a pair or, sometimes, with a third friend. They were also in the same tutor group. They remained close friends throughout their first year at college until Jenny decided to move to another sixth-form college (a considerable distance away) and

repeat the first year of her GNVQ studies there. This seemed to have a significant impact on their friendship: both reported the practical difficulties of meeting up and during the second year of the research they had relatively little contact with each other. Both made new friends within their subject groups at their respective colleges.

### **Becky and Clare**

Although Becky and Clare were not close friends, they had attended the same secondary school and were friendly with each other throughout the two years at college. Becky spent most time with her best friend, Jane, and four other young women who were part of the same friendship group. Her friendships changed little during the study. Similarly, Clare's friendship group remained stable over the two years. She, also, had a best friend, Juliet, as well as a wider group of friends – the majority of whom she knew from her secondary school.

### **Paul**

Paul was the only person from his secondary school who enrolled at Emily Davies College in 1999. He made a conscious decision to move away from his school friends and the sixth-form college most of them planned to go to as he felt he needed to make some new friends and improve his social skills before he went to university. During his first year at college Paul made friends in his subject groups and in the Christian Union – and these remained relatively stable throughout his time at the college. He also kept up his friendships with his school friends and continued to see them socially.

### **Sarah**

Few of Sarah's close friends transferred to Emily Davies College. Karen and Nicola, who were her best friends from school, enrolled at another local sixth-form college. During her first year at college, Sarah saw a lot of both of them and continued to socialise with them out of college – along with a new friend from Emily Davies College, Jess. In her second year, Sarah continued to be close friends with Nicola but saw less of Karen. Over this period she became closer to two friends from college who she had met in her subject classes and saw them out of college, as well.

### **Liz**

Jacky had been Liz's best friend at school and they continued to be close throughout their time at college. They lived near each other and socialised together out of college. Liz

maintained a number of other friendships from school, as well, over the two-year period, although she felt she had grown apart from some school friends, as she perceived them as less 'academic' as her. She had also made some new friends in her subject classes, including Michelle, with whom she applied to university.

### **Jim**

Jim reported few changes to his friends over the time he was at Emily Davies College. His closest friends were those he had known since primary school. Several of them also attended Emily Davies College but a few had gone to another sixth-form college in the area. Although Jim socialised with them all out of college, he felt that he was closer to those at Emily Davies. Over the two years at college, Jim also spent a lot of time with his girlfriend, Elaine.

### **Lucy**

Lucy was part of a friendship group of eight young women – all of whom had been to the same secondary school and been friends for several years. Within this group, Lucy had two closest friends at the start of the research: Susie and Megan. Over the course of the two years, she saw less of Susie but remained close friends with Megan. In the second year at college the young women spent less time together as a group (and more with their boyfriends) but Lucy felt that this had not changed the nature of their friendships.

### **Simon**

Simon reported very little change in his friends over the course of the project. On entry to Emily Davies College his best friends were Peter and David and they remained so throughout the two years. He knew both of them from his secondary school. Simon was also friendly with several people who attended another local sixth-form college and saw them regularly. At the beginning of the research, Simon and Lucy considered themselves to be friends but, after their tutor groups were reorganised at the beginning of their second year, they saw little of each other.

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **DETAILS OF FIELDWORK**

#### **1. Contact with students**

Initial presentations to two tutor groups. Twenty-nine students completed a questionnaire about their friends at college. Fifteen students were selected to take part in the project.

November 1999

First round of interviews

December 1999 – January 2000

Second round of interviews

March – April 2000

Third round of interviews

June – July 2000

Fourth round of interviews

December 2000

Fifth round of interviews

March 2001

Sixth round of interviews

August – September 2001

Interviews in rounds 1-5 were conducted on college premises. For the final round, the young people chose whether to be interviewed at home, the University of Southampton or a local coffee shop.

## **2. Interviews with members of staff**

College careers coordinator	22 March 2000
Vice-principal, with responsibility for higher education entry	3 May 2000
Careers adviser	2 June 2000
Oxbridge coordinator	30 June 2000
Compact coordinator	8 March 2001

## **3. Documents collected**

- personal statements students wrote for their UCAS forms
- college prospectus
- information about post-18 destinations of past students
- handouts given to students and parents about higher education entry
- 'Portfolio of Achievement' (college document to record achievements and future plans)
- press cuttings about Emily Davies College university entry

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **QUESTIONNAIRE USED TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS**

## RESEARCH ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES

I am a student at Southampton University, studying for a postgraduate degree in sociology and social policy. I am conducting some research on young people's choices about higher education and would like to select some groups of friends at [name of college] to participate in my project.

To help me identify friendship patterns in this tutor group, I would be grateful if you could answer the questions below. I would also like to know whether or not you would be prepared to take part in an initial interview.

All your responses will be treated as confidential. If anything is unclear, please ask me to explain.

**Your name:** .....

**1. Who is/are your BEST FRIEND(S) at [name of college]? Please write their name(s) in the space below.** *If they are not in the same tutor group as you, please give the name of their tutor.*

**2. Do you have other friends IN YOUR TUTOR GROUP?** *If so, please write their names in the space below.*



**3. Do you have other friends in the college WHO ARE NOT IN YOUR TUTOR GROUP?** *If so, please write their names and the name of their tutor in the space below.*

**Would you be prepared to be interviewed about your early experiences at [name of college]?** *If so, please tick this box.*

☐

**Thank you very much for your help.**

## **APPENDIX 6**

### **EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEW SCHEDULES**

## **Schedule for interview 1**

### **1. Background**

Why did you decide to come to Emily Davies College?

Did you consider other places? If so, which?

Did many of your friends come to Emily Davies College as well? How many?

What subjects are you studying here?

Why did you choose them in particular?

Can you briefly tell me what GCSEs you did and the grades you got?

Were you pleased with your results?

### **2. Expectations of Emily Davies College**

What did you think the subjects you chose would be like?

Are they as you expected? In what ways?

What did you think the teaching would be like? Different from at school? Teachers different?

Is it as you expected? In what ways?

What did you think the social life at college would be like?

Is it as you expected? In what ways?

What did you think the other students would be like?

Are they as you expected? In what ways?

What did you think the facilities here would be like?

Are they as you expected? In what ways?

### **3. Initial Ambitions**

Do you have any plans for when you leave Emily Davies College?

If so, what are they?

How definite are they?

If not, what do you think you *might* do?

*If considering HE:*

Why do you want to go on to university?

What courses are you thinking about?

Any idea which universities/colleges or types? Why? How gained information?

Any universities/colleges would not consider? Why?

How much would you say you know about HE? (from where? parents? friends?)

Have you ever talked about going on to university with any of your friends? If so, what did you talk about?

*If not considering HE:*

Have you considered going on to university? Why? Why not?

Why have you decided against it?

How much would you say you know about HE? (from where? parents? friends?)

Have you ever talked about going on to university with any of your friends? If so, what did you talk about?

Do you have any other plans for your career?

If so, what are they?

When did you decide that you wanted to be an X? Why?

How easy do you think it will be to become an X? What will you have to do?

#### **4. Careers activities**

Have you had any advice about your career or taken part in any careers activities since arriving at Emily Davies College?

If so, what? How useful did you find it/them?

If not, do you think it would have been useful? Why?

Do you think you will be doing any careers activities (or anything about HE) next term?

If so, what? *[ask for details: who is running it, who will be taking part]*

If not, why?

When do you think is a good time to start thinking about what to do when you leave Emily Davies College?

Have you used your portfolio of achievement yet?

If so, what have you done? How useful did you find it?

If not, do you know when you will be using it? Do you know what it is for?

## **5. Friends**

Can you describe the different groups of people who you are friends with?

Can you tell me how you became friends with *[names of best friends]*?

How much do you see of each other in college?

Do you see each other outside college? What do you do?

What are the best things about being friends with *[names of best friends]*?

Is there anything that you don't talk about with *[names of best friends]*?

### ***If best friends not in tutor group:***

*Although you said they weren't your best friends, you named some people in your tutor group as your friends [read names].*

How did you become friends with them?

How much time do you spend together?

What kind of things do you do together?

How do your friendships with them differ from your friendships with your best friends?

Do you have any best friends outside college?

How did you become friends with them?

How much time do you spend together?

What kind of things do you do together?

### **Schedule for interview 3**

#### **1. Progress with subjects**

How are they going?

How did the exams go? Grades?

Predicted grades?

#### **2. Latest ideas about HE**

Latest ideas: Which HEIs? Courses?

Reasons for decisions? How did you rule out others?

When did you decide?

How?

Any changes since last time? If so, why?

[If not answered previously: Any HEIs which you would not consider?]

#### **3. HE activities**

What have you done?

- i. with tutor - work on Portfolio of Achievement; advice, talks
- ii. college-wide activities - HE fair, Oxbridge visits?, Routes to HE talk, others?
- iii. individual activities - what done?; open days; personal statement; choices; HE guides, internet

When?

How useful have you found them?

Did your parents go to the Routes to Higher Education talk?

If so, did they find it useful?

What did they say to you about it?

Advice from parents or others?

Have you discussed your choices with your parents much?

#### **4. Talking about HE with friends**

Have you discussed HE with your friends at all this term?

If so, what have you said? Who have you talked to? Why them?

What do they think of the places you are interested in?

What are your friends' plans?

What do you think of the places they are interested in?

Is there anything about HE that you deliberately have not discussed with your friends? Why?

Has talking about HE with your friends been difficult in any way?

[Has anything they have said influenced your thinking about HE?]

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