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# ‘Fitting in’ or ‘standing out’: working-class students in UK higher education

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Drawing on case studies of 27 working-class students across four UK higher education institutions, this article attempts to develop a multilayered, sociological understanding of student identities that draws together social and academic aspects. Working with a concept of student identity that combines the more specific notion of learner identity with more general understandings of how students are positioned in relation to their discipline, their peer group and the wider university, the article examines the influence of widely differing academic places and spaces on student identities. Differences between institutions are conceptualised in terms of institutional habitus, and the article explores how the four different institutional habituses result in a range of experiences of fitting in and standing out in higher education. For some this involves combining a sense of belonging in both middle-class higher education and working-class homes, while others only partially absorb a sense of themselves as students.

## Background

Recent statistics from the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) show 24.72% of those accepted to university were from the four lowest socio-economic groups in 2005. The year before, the figure was 25.61% (Shepherd, 2007). Our research is taking place at a time when in the UK and globally, there is concern about ‘widening participation’ and breaking down the exclusivity of university education (McDonough & Fann, 2007). In addition, there is concern about retaining students and ensuring progress. In the UK, the universities with the most success at widening participation also have the highest drop-out rates (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2006). Whilst universities are reporting success in widening participation, there exists an apparent polarisation between those universities

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attracting working-class and minority ethnic students and those attracting the traditional university constituency—the white middle classes (Sutton Trust, 2000). So we see significant differences in participation by social class at different types of university. For example, 16% of those admitted in 2000 by the 19 Russell Group universities<sup>1</sup> were from the three social classes covering the most disadvantaged groups, compared with the HEFCE benchmark figure of 19%. As the benchmark already takes account of prior attainment levels, these figures show that prior attainment cannot be the sole factor in patterns of entry to higher education. Even where young people from disadvantaged groups have obtained the appropriate qualifications for these universities, they are still less likely to attend.

A similar result emerged from a study by the Sutton Trust (2007) of the top 13 universities as measured by press league tables. Of the 300,000 of the nation's university applicants from less affluent social backgrounds just over 1% get into one of the top 13 universities. There are similar concerns in the USA where, in the year 2000, students from families in the bottom 50% of the income distribution made up 10% of first years at Princeton and 12% at Harvard, two of the US elite universities (Karabel, 2005). However, in the UK context even the universities that are apparently successful at widening participation, those in the post-1992 sector, are only relatively successful. In 2006 the proportion of state school pupils and those from low-income families at university across the entire higher education field dropped to its lowest level in three years, despite government pressure to increase their numbers (Blair, 2006).

## Literature review

The processes through which different types of university affect aspects of identity such as race, social class, and gender, as well as the processes through which these three aspects of identity themselves affect students' university experiences, have received substantial attention, particularly in the USA (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Stewart & Ostrove, 1993; Feagin *et al.*, 1996; Padilla, 1997; Leathwood & Read, 2008). The primary focus of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research project that this article is based on was social class. Whilst recognising that class is always mediated by gender and ethnicity, the key aspect of identity we concentrate on here is class, and how it is modified, reinforced or transformed through the experience of going to university, particularly in relation to how students develop their learner identities.

There is limited UK research comparing student experiences across the university sector, and even less that compares and contrasts working-class students' experiences. In order to address this lacuna, in this article we focus on the social and learning experiences of working-class students in different types of higher education institutions (HEIs).

We have deployed the concept of institutional habitus in order to explore such experiences. Habitus is a dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective (Bourdieu, 1999; Reay, 2004). Bourdieu describes habitus as 'a power of adaptation. It constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world

which only occasionally takes the form of radical conversion' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 88). Dispositions inevitably reflect the social context in which they are acquired. Any conception of institutional habitus would similarly constitute a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation (McDonough, 1997). Institutional habituses, no less than individual habituses, have a history and have in most cases been established over time. They are, therefore, capable of change but by dint of their collective nature are less fluid than individual habitus. Applying this concept to the four institutions in our study, we can see that the academic status of an HEI (its position in the university hierarchy) constitutes an important part of institutional habitus. At the same time, there are other interrelated elements, most notably, curriculum offer, organisational practices, and less tangible, but equally important, cultural and expressive characteristics. These latter aspects, 'the expressive order' of institutions, include expectations, conduct, character and manners (Bernstein, 1975). They constitute embodied cultural capital—embodied in the collectivity of students, in their dress, demeanour and attitudes, in particular, their attitudes towards learning and their degree of confidence and entitlement in relation to academic knowledge (Reay *et al.*, 2005).

Quantitative studies carried out in the USA, using both national data (Walpole, 2003) and institutional data (Berger & Milem, 1999) found social class differences in academic and social integration which ultimately resulted in different levels of institutional commitment. More recently, qualitative studies in the USA indicate that social class has an impact on levels of integration and the extent to which students feel that they 'fit in' (Aries & Seider, 2005, 2007). Similarly, Thomas and Quinn (2007) in their study of non-traditional students in the UK found they were relatively unprepared for the university experience and lacked a sense of entitlement. It is not surprising, then, that students tend to choose a university with which they feel comfortable, where there are 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990). Given this and students' dispositions for 'choosing', there is a greater tendency for working-class students and students from minority ethnic groups in the UK to go to post-1992 universities, which tend to have more open access and encourage diverse applicants, and for middle-class students to attend pre-1992 universities which tend towards more elitism (Sutton Trust, 2000).

### **The research study**

Our research project (ESRC RES-139-25-0208) focuses on undergraduate students aged 18 years and above from working-class backgrounds, including white and minority ethnic women and men. The social class of the students was defined by employing the Office of National Statistics Social and Economic Classifications (Rose & O'Reilly, 2000). We focused on categories L7–L14. We further refined our sampling through the interview process and thus gathered information about parents' educational profiles and ascertained whether these students were first in their immediate or extended families to go to university.

We have employed mixed methods across four HEIs comprising an elite (Southern), civic (Midland), and post-1992 (Northern) university, and a college of further education (Eastern), located in three different geographical areas. We have selected these different types of institutions in order to discern a cross-section of experiences by working-class students. We also initially selected three different disciplinary areas—law, chemistry and history—but at Southern and Midland we had to extend our history category to English, while at Northern and Southern we replaced chemistry with engineering in order to access enough working-class students. At Eastern we were constrained by the subjects offered at degree level. As a consequence our working-class undergraduates there are studying performing arts and early childhood studies.

A questionnaire was distributed to all year 1 and year 2 students across these institutions in the identified subjects in order to find basic information about their qualifications, social class, ethnicity, gender, motivation for choice of university, subject, career aspirations; views on their university experience, both academic and social, and major challenges facing them on coming to university and through their time there. A total of 1209 completed questionnaires was analysed; for response rates see Appendix 1.<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire data provided both generalisable information about aspects of a cross-section of student experiences in a representative sample of HEIs and acted as the context for the subsequent case-study data (Crozier *et al.*, 2008). We also used this questionnaire to identify students for follow-up group interviews with students from a range of class backgrounds, but more importantly, to locate our target group of working-class students. These working-class case studies (27 in total) were followed from April in one year to June the following year, thereby traversing parts of two academic year experiences (see Appendix 2 for details of the case-study sample). We interviewed the students at key decision-making moments (Ball *et al.*, 2000) such as the beginning and end of term or start of a new module/course, before and after assessment periods, and also kept in contact with them through email. In total we carried out 97 face-to-face interviews with these case-study students, focusing on their perceptions of themselves and whether this changes over time and whether and how it impacts upon their attitudes to their studies and their sense of self. We wanted to find out whether these students strive to change and conform to the institutional milieu or to reproduce their identities in an act of resistance, or whether they merely seek validation for who they are; to discern to what extent they fit in or stand out. In addition, we observed lectures and seminars in the subjects our case-study students were studying in order to gain a better understanding of both institutional habitus and the students' learning dispositions.

Although all of our case-study students are working class, there are differences between them which in turn impacts on their experiences and learner identities; for example, they include mature and non-mature students with families or other domestic/caring commitments, students at differing academic levels, those who find themselves in poor socio-economic circumstances and are really struggling financially, those who have enough to get by reasonably comfortably, those who saw university as the logical next step in their careers, and those who never thought they would be at university.

Although we have drawn on Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus and field as sensitising concepts in the analysis of data, we have also worked in an inductive way in order to remain open to more grounded ways of understanding our data. In this article we focus on the findings that relate to the first of our three research objectives, namely to compare and contrast the social and learning experiences of working-class students in different types of higher education institution.

### **Institutional habitus: four very different institutional contexts**

The class profiles of the four institutions are very different. Whilst working-class students are not a majority in any of the three universities, the largest percentage of working-class students are at Northern, then Midland, with a small minority at Southern University. Eastern's demographic profile is unknown as Eastern does not keep these statistics. However, amongst our questionnaire sample of first-year degree students just over 50% are working class.

Our interview and observational data suggest that 'an institutional effect', what we call institutional habitus (McDonough, 1997; Reay, 1998), acts as an intervening variable, providing a semi-autonomous means by which class processes are played out in the higher education experiences of students, and provides the parameter of possibilities in terms of identity work and the range of learner identities. All universities and colleges, including the four in our study, have identifiable institutional habituses in which their organisational culture and ethos is linked to wider socio-economic and educational cultures through processes in which universities and the different student constituencies they recruit mutually shape and reshape each other. In other words the type of higher education institution these working-class students attend exerts a powerful influence on how they see themselves and are seen by others in terms of both their learner and class identities. This is particularly so, as we illustrate below, for the ways in which their learner identities evolve and develop.

#### *The comforts and the costs of familiarity*

In Eastern, although the students are taking degree courses they lack access to the normal range of university resources and although they are entitled to use university facilities very few do because of pressure of time and geographical constraints. Nearly all the students still live with their families and cited a combination of location and financial reasons for choosing to study for a degree at Eastern rather than the more distant local university. One of our case-study students explains:

I would have went to Bedly College or Manton College but then it was the whole issue of transport and getting there which was what put us off. So I said 'Oh well there's Eastern College', I mean it's right on my doorstep. I can get there relatively easy and quickly and it's something that's right there. (John, white, working-class student, performing arts, Eastern)

The Eastern students retain the comforts of the familiar but often at the cost of developing as confident academic learners. Staying close to home both geographically and

academically provides a sense of safety and reassurance, and a higher education experience that is qualitatively different to that of working-class students at institutions like Midland and Southern. Rather, it is one characterised by continuity rather than the change and transformation of working-class habitus in the more elite universities (Reay *et al.*, 2009 forthcoming).

In Northern, a post-1992 university in an economically deprived urban area, students tend to live at home or off campus. Nearly all work part-time, or in a few cases full-time, whilst studying. However, while academic staff are of the view that most students are working class, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data (2004/05), only 39.5% are working class. At Northern, while seminars are compulsory lectures are not; students could request tutorials but there was no formal timetabled tutor time. Although there is a minority of students among our sample who feel passionate about learning and have an enormous commitment and love of their subject area, a majority are operating with lower levels of commitment. Mary Owens at Northern talks negatively about what she sees as pervasive instrumental attitudes to knowledge and learning:

The amount of people who think that they can just look at their notes and understand it and not come to seminars is unreal. They are not going to understand it by just reading about it, it's impossible ... there are a couple who I talk to and I've actually said to them a few times, why are you even here? Because they're just not bothered at all and they're like, oh I don't know, I just thought I'd come here. I said, do you actually want anything out of it? And they're like yeah a degree and like well, I don't know, they just don't seem to really care and you just don't think they are ever going to be actually able to come out with anything worthwhile. (Mary Owens, white, working-class law student, Northern)

At both Eastern and Northern the congruence between individual and institutional habitus often lulls working-class students into a sense of security and symmetry, providing a comfort zone where the working-class students feel they are accepted. But there are costs. A majority of students at both institutions 'go through university rather than university going through them' (Archer & Leathwood, 2003, p. 177). These students, particularly at Eastern, take up 'fractured spaces within higher education ... where "people like us" can participate without damaging or changing valued working-class identities' (Archer & Leathwood, 2003, p. 178).

### *The benefits and challenges of the unfamiliar*

Midland provides a very different learning environment. It is better resourced. A majority of students live in halls, especially in the first year, and less than half work in term-time. But the biggest difference between Midland and both Northern and Eastern is that Midland students seemed to be much more integrated into the life of the university and to have a stronger sense of themselves as university students. At Midland University there is a wide spectrum of commitment to learning. Bradley describes very varied attitudes to learning among his peers at Midland in which:

A lot of people will write out notes constantly and constantly and constantly, just keep repeating themselves and some people will just do problems, and some people just don't

bother at all, some of them just go out and get drunk and just forget about it and try and block it out from their memory. (Bradley, white, working-class chemistry student, Midland)

Similarly, Sarah Jones, also at Midland, describes a range of learning dispositions from 'laid back' to 'studious', asserting that on the whole 'it's very easy going here, you do what you want and then all they want is for you to put the work in and that's it'. Other students also described a wide spectrum of learners ranging from the hard-working and committed to those operating in more instrumental ways. Such strategic attitudes and actions in relation to learning were particularly apparent in relation to the first-year assignments and exams which do not count towards the final degree. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, three out of the six working-class case-study students at Midland are taking or have taken re-sits.

In contrast to all three other institutions Southern has a culture of intensive, highly academic teaching and learning supported by regular one-to-one or one-to-two supervisions and tutorials where the expectation is that students make substantial contributions and are challenged and questioned by both their peers and teachers. Weekly assignments and stringent academic demands mean students could not engage in paid work even if they need to, although most come from families affluent enough to provide some financial support. Neither do they have the option to be 'laid back'. Nothing can be taken for granted. Rather, the culture and ethos is one in which 'there is strong classification and framing' (Bernstein, 1996) and an expectation of total commitment not only to the work but to the collegiate system. Such powerful processes of institutional socialisation, and the strong academic and social guidance and channelling that underpin them, both cut across and overshadow class differences. Sarah's spectrum of learners does not exist at Southern where nearly everyone is seen to be studious. As Jamie comments, 'sure we have different groups of students here—geeky, geekier and even more geeky'. However, while learner identities appeared on the surface to hold more importance than social identities, class differences remain, lurking in the background. The Southern working-class students often approached the subject of social class apologetically, as if it should no longer have any relevance for them, but the Midland students, and especially those from minority ethnic backgrounds, were more forthcoming:

I am the odd one out really because on my course there's no one really from my kind of background, they're all middle-class kids really. (Bhavesh, Asian, working-class history student, Midland)

### **The influence of institutional habitus on student identities**

The degree to which students' learner identities became their main and strongest source of identity was connected to a key aspect of institutional habitus, the extent to which students either lived at home, on campus or in university accommodation. In the questionnaire survey 100% of the Eastern students indicated that they lived at home; in Northern the figure was 70%, with 11% living on campus and 16% in university accommodation. The percentages were much lower at Midland (10%



living at home, 40% on campus and 47% in university accommodation), while in Southern 82% of the students lived on campus and the rest were all in university accommodation. The influence of institutional habitus was further reinforced by the very differing levels of labour market involvement in the HEIs. Sixty-four per cent of the Northern students were undertaking paid work, 42% of the Eastern students, 30% at Midland and only 8% at Southern.

These four very different institutional habituses were further reflected in the survey questionnaire responses<sup>3</sup> to how intellectually challenging were students' courses. In Southern 77% of students rated intellectual challenge as high. The comparable percentages at Midland, Northern and Eastern were 35%, 27% and 42% respectively. Similarly, there were wide disparities in the level of academic support students perceived. Some 41% of Southern students rated academic support as high, while in Midland the figure was 16% and in Northern 10%, but slightly higher at Eastern (27%). Relatedly, the questionnaire responses revealed that 82% of Southern students and 67% of Eastern students had regular one-to-one support while the figures for Midland (28%) and Northern (15%) were much lower.

The statistics were supported by the interview data, with Southern students talking about far more support for learning than in less resourced universities like Northern. Northern is suffering from the conditions that Blackmore (1997, p. 92) writes about in which 'the under-resourcing of teaching has meant a shift from "fat" to "lean-and-mean" pedagogies, with reduced tutorials, increased tutorial size, and less student contact'. Paradoxically, it is in Northern that students talk about having to rely on their own intellectual resources rather than learn in collegial, experiential and often more challenging ways:

I would have preferred more classroom contact, maybe that's because I don't particularly like just total independent learning, I like feedback and maybe that's because I'm not er, I wasn't fully, how can I put it? I was worried about my ability to do work on my own, whether I was going in the right or the wrong direction, I wasn't sure and I find that I would like more contact with lecturers within the module. I find that a lecture and a seminar isn't enough.

... I think the more you talk, the more you learn you know, so on a personal angle, when I leave my lecture or my seminar and I go home, it's just sort of me. I'd like to go home and talk about it or come out of my lecture and go into the café and talk about what we've been learning, but most people don't want that. (Arthur, mature, white, working-class history student, Northern)

Arthur's words resonate with the findings of Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) and Read *et al.* (2003). Both studies found that working-class students in post-1992 universities felt strongly that they were expected to be independent learners early on in their university course but without sufficient supervision and guidance.

The institutional habituses of the four very different higher education institutions had a powerful impact on how the case-study students developed as learners over the two years of the research study. Particularly in Eastern and Northern, where the students have to manage competing demands of paid work and family responsibilities with being a student, the students only partially absorb a sense of themselves as

students, and their learner identities remain relatively fragile and unconfident. Reinforcing an often tenuous sense of self as a successful learner is the continuation of the attitudes and dispositions that permeate schooling, and in particular working-class schooling in which it is seen to be 'uncool' to work hard:

If my friends at uni knew how much work I did, I would never, ever tell them I loved history, because I would just like have no friends, and sometimes I come in and say, oh yeah, I haven't done the reading, when I have, I've done three times as much as I should have done. (Kylie, white, working-class history student, Northern)

In contrast, in Southern, and to a lesser extent in Midland, students develop a strong sense of themselves as academic learners, and by the end of the second year, had come to perceive themselves as achieving a mastery over their subject area (Reay *et al.*, 2009 forthcoming). So the type of higher education institution these working-class students attend exerts a powerful influence on how they see themselves and are seen by others in terms of their learner identities. We see this again in what Kylie says about the lack of challenge at Northern:

If I was in a really good university, like I think there should be something in place where if you were supposed to get As and something really serious happened at home then that should be extenuating circumstances and you should be able to go to a university that is your level because I'm not really being challenged here. I know I'm getting good grades but if I was at a really good uni I think I'd be getting better. (Kylie, white, working-class history student, Northern)

### *The relationship between learner identities and social identities of class*

There is a spectrum of the experience of being a university student with at one end Eastern and Northern, where the experience of being a student is only one small aspect of an individual's identity. For the most part students at Eastern do not develop an identity as a university student, and our case-study students' primary sense of identification is as local, working-class and 'at college'. At Northern, students have a number of competing identities as university students, but also as local and working class. They are jostling work and family commitments with doing a degree, and often the first two overwhelm and take precedence over studying. So one male mature working-class student at Northern rued the fact that:

I'm terrible with deadlines, I find practically every module, for one piece of work I've always got to hand it in late, and that's because I've got to go to work and you know family things happen, people die and people get married and you know you've got to drop your work sometimes to suit that you know. (Arthur, mature white, working-class history student, Northern)

In contrast, at Southern and to a lesser degree Midland, being a university student becomes the individual's main source of identity:

Once you're in Southern, you know, you can't do anything else. You're effectively a student trapped by your circumstances because you're not like students anywhere else, I don't think. You can't extract yourself from that life. You have to live it because you

workload is so hard, because even your social life is concerned with the University. (Jim, white, working-class history student, Southern)

Jim's words convey the extent to which being a student at Southern often fills the whole of an individual's life—every aspect of life, both work and social activities, revolve around the university. The result is widely disparate experiences of being a university student ranging from the Eastern students who, for the most part, do not even recognise themselves as undergraduates to the students at Southern for whom the university, its social activities, in particular those organised around their college, and their degree course, literally fill their whole life.

Identities mobilise both personal biographies and group histories (Brah, 2007). We have tried to make sense of how the students' learner identities, constituted within the context of schooling and now being reconfirmed or reshaped in the more recent context of higher education, harmonise or conflict with social identities of class. As Parekh (2007) argues, identities can overlap, interact and shape each other, but particularly when we put working-class background together with schooling the different dimensions of identity can be seen to be in conflict with each other (Willis, 1977; Weis, 1990; Skeggs, 1997). Thomas and Quinn (2007) argue that ambivalence is generated when different cultural narratives about what it is to be educated and working class collide. We can glimpse a level of ambivalence in what Linsey, in her third year at Southern, says about her mother's continued reaction to her daughter attending an elite university:

I still don't think my mother really approves of me going to Southern. It's not what her daughter should be doing so I don't really mention it when I go home. It's kind of uncomfortable to talk about it. (Linsey, white, working-class law student, Southern)

Clearly, many working-class parents, including those of the case-study students, want their children to go to university but there remain underlying fears that the move may result in 'abandoning the family and its norms and values' (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p. 63). Yet, connection and proximity to home and family remain important for the students across all four institutions. As Bradley, a chemistry student at Midland, reasoned in relation to his choice of a university 40 miles from his family home, 'I just wanted to stay close'. Previous research has argued that academic success for working-class students requires breaking with class practices and distancing from family and home community (Connell *et al.*, 1982; Desmarchelier 1999; McDonald, 1999; Kaufman, 2003). However, unlike the working-class students in Kaufman's (2003) study who engaged in processes of dissociating themselves from working-class family and friends, that was rarely the case in our study. Despite continuing ambivalences among both the students and their families, for the most part the working-class students at the two more elite universities had begun to work on the difficult process of reconciling the disjuncture between working-class background and academic dispositions long before they arrived at university. Most were intent on managing the tensions between the two in ways that maintained a strong connection to those who Louise, an engineering student at Southern, described as 'the people I care about from back home'.

### **'Fish out of water'? Fit or lack of fit between learner identities and institutional habitus**

The students' experiences raise interesting questions in relation to Bourdieu and Passeron's (1979) notion of working-class students as 'fish out of water' in educational contexts. As we have seen earlier, at Eastern and Northern they appeared to fit in and feel at home, although the two most enthusiastic and committed learners did talk of having to dissemble and play down the amount of academic work they did:

I start my assignment straight away ... and they're all panicking two hours before the deadline and I've already finished mine. But sometimes I say: 'oh yeah I haven't done mine either', just to sort of fit in. I know that's really, really stupid and I should have the courage of my convictions but I don't know, I just want to fit in I suppose. Like with my dissertation so I think that's absolutely stupid to start it at Christmas, but I'll probably tell them I'm going to start mine at Christmas as well but [Laughs]. If I went in and said I spent the whole summer, like it would be funny, it's certainly not bullying, I don't want you to get the impression it's bullying, it's very implicit, it's like I don't know, I just do it to fit in which is really, really stupid but ... I really don't want to be the clever one or the swot, do you know what I mean? (Kylie, white, working-class history student, Northern)

In the quote above we see the power of institutional habitus in the form of a student learning culture defined by 'laid-back' attitudes and a casual, last-minute approach to academic work. Kylie mentions her desire to fit in with her student peers three times and it is obvious that she feels her enthusiasm for learning needs to be tempered, at least in front of other Northern students. Her situation also highlights disjunctures and potential rifts between learner and social identities. As she states very clearly, 'Socially, yeah, I fit in totally here, I just don't fit in academically'.

Kylie is applying to a Russell Group university to do a Master's course and points out that there she will 'fit in fine academically but won't fit in at all socially'. Kylie's words touch on an irony for working-class students in higher education. At Midland and Southern, where the working-class students should have had the greatest problems in developing a sense of belonging, there was the paradox of fitting in in terms of learner orientations. Most of the case-study students had similar learner identities to their middle-class peers, and particularly in Southern, where being 'bright', academically oriented, and 'geeky' is foregrounded in learning contexts, class background becomes relatively unimportant, although it resurfaces in social contexts, and for some in political commitments.

The crucial difference between students at the four institutions lies more in the learner identities that they bring to the higher education context than in differing identifications and social identities. While students at Southern, and to a lesser extent at Midland, have developed a strong sense of themselves as successful learners—they have discovered that 'they do academic and do it well' often from an early age and often in contrast to the majority of their peers in the predominantly working-class schools they have attended—a majority of the working-class students at Northern and Eastern have learner identities that are more fragile and unconfident. This sense of self-doubt and anxiety around learning was gendered. It was women more than men

who felt that they did not really deserve to be in higher education (Leathwood & Read, 2008):

Unfortunately my experiences of school always taught me that, I mean I was always a late learner, I never caught on particularly quickly but when I did it was always slightly later. So I was always brought up with the attitude that oh Sarah will never amount to anything and actually my head of sixth form tried to prevent me from doing law. (Sarah, white, working-class law student, Northern)

Barbara also mentions her self doubt:

Academically wise I keep thinking I shouldn't be here; that, you know, I'm not up to the level that I should be. I think it's my own personal, it's in my head. I'm just doubting myself. (Barbara, mature, white, working-class history student, Northern)

*The continuing impact of widely differing levels of resources and support*

Sarah refers to her negative school experiences, and many of the Northern students raise aspects of school learning that had been negative and undermining. However, another contributory factor was an aspect of institutional habitus we have already noted. Northern University, and to a lesser extent Midland and Eastern, did not have the personnel and resources to provide students with personally focused learning experiences. Compounding such institutional influences, their students' complex and often overloaded lives, especially at Northern and Eastern, meant neither were students in a position to challenge themselves academically:

When I had my two jobs I felt like I was paying too much attention to one job or too much attention to the other job and I just didn't feel like I was focusing on the university at all. I felt like I was just squeezing it in when I could. (Deborah, white, working-class engineering student, Northern)

Students at Northern and Eastern are governed by expediency and 'the logic of necessity' (Bourdieu, 1990) in which their learner identities are constantly at risk of being subsumed by their responsibilities and commitments as workers and family members. The psycho-social strains and academic costs of juggling work, family and university course were highlighted in Kylie's story of being able to give up work on receipt of a small inheritance from her grandfather:

I was working so many hours and I got quite low grades ... then I got an inheritance from my granddad so if it hadn't been for that I'd still be working full-time hours. I mean my marks went right up because I used to get like 40s, 50s and stuff like that and all my marks last semester were firsts.

As she goes on to point out, there is a clear connection between competing demands such as work and family commitments and realising one's academic potential:

I was doing 36 hours a week and being a full-time student, it's impossible. I just wasn't going to reach my potential.

There is a stark contrast with the highly positive accounts that the Southern students provide of developing as a learner over the two years of the research study. All nine

students, looking back over the research period, were positive about their learning experience, and the quote below encapsulates a consensus across the Southern sample:

I've learnt so much ... The gains here are enormous. You can't really compare the education you get here with anywhere else because it's so intense and challenging and so intellectual and yeah they've just got experts in every field here, just so amazing. (Jamie, white, working-class law student, Southern)

As Jamie makes clear, for the most part there is a compounding of advantage, with the more confident and committed learners in the better resourced and supported universities.

### *The heterogeneity of working-class learner identities*

These working-class students are complexly and multiply positioned on a number of cross-cutting spectrums in relation to their learner identities—the highly independent to largely passive learner; the highly committed who are passionate about their subject to the largely instrumental learners who are simply studying in order to get a good job; the confident to the unconfident. But this heterogeneity exists across very different social and educational fields characterised by widely differing levels of resources and support. There is no perfect fit and these different types of learners cannot be mapped neatly onto different types of institution. Some students find themselves in the wrong type of university: not just in terms of social class but in terms of learner identity—what they want out of their learning and how they want to get it. Northern has 'passionate committed learners' but these seem to be 'fish out of water' among a prevalence of more 'laid-back learners'. However, the tendency, unsurprisingly, as we have pointed out earlier, is for the independent, committed and more confident working-class students to be in Southern and to a lesser extent Midland. So two law students at Southern talked about reading around the topic:

I find it difficult just to learn one book. I find it difficult to learn about three books, because of the volume, but it's easier to understand what's going on. So if there's time, then that's what I'd try to do. (Linsey, white, working-class law student, Southern)

And:

I always tried not just to do the basics at school but to read around the subject, just think around the subject even if it didn't mean getting much feedback or developing my arguments with a teacher or even other students. (Jamie, white, working-class law student, Southern)

Bradley elaborates a deep learning orientation in relation to chemistry:

I find it really interesting because you get to explain stuff that people usually can't and you get to look at things and are able to see why things happen and you get more and more understanding until eventually you feel you can explain almost anything. (Bradley, white, working-class chemistry student, Midland)

Such simultaneously expansive and deep approaches to learning were rarely mentioned at either Northern or Eastern. So the important thing to stress is the

heterogeneity of the working-class sample and in particular the range and diversity of learner identities among them. The working-class students at Southern share with their middle-class peers there a strong, positive sense of themselves as successful learners. This is shared but to a lesser extent by the Midland students. In contrast, at Northern the working-class students have often had negative school experiences and as a result, as their quotes illustrate, their learner identities are more conflicted and unconfident.

This lack of confidence is reinforced by the feeling of many of the Northern students that they had had to go to Northern either because they had failed to get in anywhere else or because they were not capable of going to universities they perceived to be 'better'. As Barbara reasoned in relation to a pre-1992 university that she perceived to be much higher status than Northern:

I just felt Norton might be out of my depth, be a bit like Harvard ... that it just wasn't where I should be have been. Whereas here would probably be more my level. (Barbara, mature white, working-class history student, Northern)

Bourdieu writes of how objective limits become transformed into a practical anticipation of objective limits; a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471). A majority of the working-class students at Northern expressed high levels of ambivalence about universities they perceived to be 'better' than Northern, marking them out as 'not for the likes of us'. Here fitting in is primarily about low academic self-esteem and an avoidance of challenge. There is a match between institutional and individual habitus, but one that is potentially counterproductive, reinforcing earlier school learning dispositions often grounded in a lack of academic confidence and a tenuous sense of being 'a good learner'.

## Conclusion

The rewards and recognition of being a university student are powerfully differentiated across the higher education field. Fitting in has hazards for Eastern and Northern students. While standing out as 'sad' and 'nerdy' is clearly uncomfortable, fitting in can also be problematic, especially if it means academic complacency and a lack of challenge. The contrast with Midland and Southern universities is stark, in terms of both institutional and personal resources. As a consequence it is Midland and Southern students like Bradley and Linsey, managing a productive tension between 'fitting in' and 'standing out', who most successfully deal with the challenges of being a working-class student in higher education. But at the same time it is important to recognise that the small number of working-class students attaining places at elite universities face not only academic challenge, but also considerable identity work, and the discomforts generated when habitus confronts a starkly unfamiliar field (Reay *et al.*, 2009 forthcoming).

However, beyond the very different and inequitable experiences of working-class university students are the enduring inequities of the field. McDonough and Fann

(2007) map the stratification across the field of higher education in the USA, outlining the resulting inequalities it generates. Very similar inequalities persist in the UK context. Working-class students, for the most part, end up in universities seen to be 'second class' both by themselves and others. And as Bourdieu (1999, p. 423) asserts, 'after an extended school career, which often entails considerable sacrifice, the most culturally disadvantaged run the risk of ending up with a devalued degree'. The success stories of the very few working-class students who make it into UK elite universities, whilst welcomed, have little impact on the broader picture of continuing classed and racialised inequalities (Blanden & Machin, 2007).

## Notes

1. The 'Russell Group' universities are Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, Warwick, Imperial College, London, Kings College, London, London School of Economics and Political Science, and University College London. It is sometimes referred to as the British equivalent of the Ivy League of the United States and contains many of the UK's leading universities, with a majority of its members in the top 20 in terms of research funding.
2. 1004 of the questionnaires were completed face-to-face and 205 were completed online.
3. 292 questionnaires were completed by students in the target disciplines in Southern, 597 in Midland, 277 in Northern and 33 in Eastern College.

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**Appendix 1**

Table A1. Questionnaire response rate

HEI	<i>n</i>	Percentage of total	Response rate (average—based on no. of students in year groups)
Southern University	292	24.2	22
Midlands University	597	49.4	28
Northern University	277	22.9	34
Eastern College	33	2.7	86
Other	10	.8	
Total	1209	100.0	

**Appendix 2**

Table A2. Details of working-class (ONS L7–14) case study students

HEI	Total no. students	Female	Male	18–21	22–25	26+	BME	White	1st in family
Eastern	3	1	2	3				3	3
Northern	8	6	2	4		4		8	7
Midland	7	4	3	7			3	4	6
Southern	9	5	4	8		1		9	9

Note: BME, Black and Minority Ethnic