Different Strokes for Different Folks: Diverse Students in Diverse Institutions - Experiences of Higher Education.

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Introduction

The paper draws on the interim findings of a 28 month, Economic and Social Research Council (UK) (RES-139-25-0208) funded study which focuses on the socio-cultural and learning experiences of students in Higher Education (in the UK). The research is particularly interested in the experiences of working class students but situates these within the wider context of a cross section of students (middle class as well as working class) undertaking a range of subjects. This paper focuses on and develops an analysis of this first stage data. The research takes place in four different types of institution, located in three different geographical areas, comprising an elite university -Southern), a pre 1992, civic university -Midlands, and a post 1992, ‘modern’ university -Northern, together with a college of Further Education - Eastern College, where the students in our study are studying Foundation degrees, in partnership with Northern University.
The paper compares and contrasts the socio-cultural and learning experiences of a diverse group of students’, in Years’ 1 and 2, studying a range of subjects, within and across these institutions and shows how these experiences impact on their identities and them as learners. Exploring a range of differences between the middle class and working class students, the paper discusses classed privilege and how this both manifests itself and is reproduced and reinforced in terms of university choice, the structure and ethos of the institution, the significance of subject and subject subcultures; and the students’ own familial and institutional habitus, or in other words their preparation for university.

The research takes place at a time when in the UK and globally, there is concern about ‘widening participation’ and breaking down the exclusivity of university education. 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 (HEFCE 2006). Whilst universities are reporting success in widening participation there exists an apparent polarisation of types of university attracting working class and minority ethnic students (Power et al 2003; Sutton Trust 2000). In this context we discuss what the different institutions offer their students and how the subsequent experiences compare. We also note that there are differences within each institution, particularly between subjects. We conclude that in terms of the experiences, rather than a stark polarisation, a matrix of experiences exists. This is structured by the differential wealth of universities, the structure and organisation of the institutions and their ensuing expectations of the students, as well as the students’ own socio-cultural locations.

**Methods and Data Sources**

Our research takes place in three very different universities and a college of Further Education where students are undertaking Foundation Degrees, in order to discern a cross section of experiences. The focus is on undergraduate students, in years 1 and 2, 18 years and above, from working class backgrounds including white and minority ethnic women and men. The research is mainly a qualitative study employing critical ethnographic approaches but we have also utilised a quantitative questionnaire with a cross-section of students.
We utilise the National Office of Statistics (UK) Social and Economic Classifications (Rose and O'Reilly 2000) L7-L14 of parental or mature student occupations, to define working class. This information is enhanced by details of parents’ and immediate family members’ education profiles.

We focus on five disciplinary areas but where possible the same ones in each university given the hierarchy that exists between subjects (Bourdieu 1988).

Following the distribution of the questionnaire we interviewed middle class and working class students in groups or on a one to one basis (89 participants) This has enabled us to gain more in-depth insights into their experiences and attitudes.

Then we identified for the purpose of longitudinal case studies, twenty seven working class students (3 in Eastern College, 7 in Midlands, 8 in Northern, 9 in Southern) in order to follow their progress across two academic years: Year 1 to 2 and Year 2 to 3. We used semi-structured and unstructured interviewing techniques at key moments (Ball et al 2000) and kept in contact with them through e-mail and on-line dialogues and informal/chance meetings.

We also acted as participant observers on the university campuses and have observed some teaching sessions. We spent time with the students to contribute to what Skeggs (1994) describes as the “geography of positioning and possibilities” (p72) in this way we have mapped their cultural and learning experiences, both direct and indirect, and within the short time scale of 12-18 months, charted their academic trajectories.

In addition we interviewed a sample of relevant tutors to triangulate the case study data and also gain tutor insights into the students’ experiences and their own perceptions of the students and their institutions.

The quantitative data have been analysed descriptively but cross-referenced in order to make comparisons regarding gender, class, ethnicity, age, subject discipline, year of study and type of higher education institution.

The qualitative data are coded according to a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This is complemented by conceptual frameworks, as indicated above, to enhance and develop theoretically our understanding of student
experiences, and the interrelation of learner and cultural identities and the impact on student subjectivities.

This paper is based on an analysis of questionnaire data and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 89 participants at the first stage of the research, involving both working class and middle class students, and participant observations across all sites of the research.

Diverse Institutions and Diverse Students

Much has been written about the expansion of the universities globally as well as in the UK and part of this debate ranges across the purpose of university education, to the vexed question of whether standards are falling. Although these debates and this broader context is important for our work, in this paper discussion will be confined mainly to the students’ perspectives on the purpose of their university education. However, their perspectives need to be situated within the context of their own institution. Four very different Higher Education providers were chosen for the study and as such they embody different institutional missions. The very different missions of the universities and College attract different types of students in terms of wealth, qualifications age, and ethnicities, gender seems to be more evenly balanced across the universities if not the subjects. Whilst all of the universities have a desire to widen participation not least as they are required to do by HEFCE, this translates differently in terms of their marketing and admissions policy. All three universities have similar strategies in relation to outreach work (student ambassadors, events in school, open days for school students etc). However, this converts differently in terms of recruitment. Northern University has a more open door policy whilst Southern University is highly selective and more intent on identifying the highest academic achievers. Both universities want students ‘who can make the most of the resources and experiences’ on offer but the nature of those and how they are presented to the students is very different.

What is also very clear is that the nature of expectations, as well as delivery of course programmes, differs across universities and across subjects within universities. Moreover, there exists unequal resource provision in terms of the unit of resource (amount paid for teaching per each student, to the universities by the Higher Education Funding Council), university collateral, endowments, inheritance,
research funding, and consequently differential material conditions, as well as different histories, traditions and perceptions of their worth and status both locally and nationally. All of this apparently impacts on pedagogy and learning experiences as well as the social experiences of the students.

According to Reay et al (2005) students tend to choose the university with which they feel most comfortable where there are “people like us” (Bourdieu 1986). Given this and students’ variable dispositions for ‘choosing’, there is a greater tendency for working class students and students from minority ethnic groups, to go to post 1992 universities which tend to have more open access and encourage diverse applicants and middle class students to attend pre-1992 universities which tend towards more elitism (Power et al (2003), Sutton Trust 2000). As Reay et al also say, what appears to have emerged is a polarised mass system of HE. It is unsurprising therefore that the types of student participants in our research differed according to which university/or College they attended. Whilst working class students are not a majority in any of the three universities, the largest percentage of working class students is at Northern, then Midlands with a small minority at Southern University. The College demographic profile is unknown as the College doesn’t keep these statistics. However amongst our questionnaire sample of Foundation students just over 50% are working class; further, anecdotally based estimates would suggest that the percentage is in fact higher than this.

In terms of our interview participants within any of the particular class categories, there were differences and so whilst all universities have a range of middle classes amongst their student body, at Northern these tended to be grouped around the lower professional and lower managerial/technocrat class compared to Midlands and Southern. Only one mature middle class student appeared in our Eastern College sample. However, there are more mature students at Eastern, and Northern than the other two universities with fewest at Southern. Also, it is important to stress that the working class students differed in a range of ways (age, genders, ethnicities, qualifications domestic responsibilities and financially) most notably between the universities but also within each institution.

**Preparation for university: familial and institutional habitus**
Choice of university is classed and though this is in part related to the desire to attend an establishment where the students feel they fit in and belong this is not the only factor. Structural factors will have impacted upon students' life chances throughout their school careers in terms of for example subject choices, GCSE results, whether they were able to do A levels or GNVOs, or an ACCESS course to get to university, and so on. One of our case study students, Kylie, a working class young woman at Northern University, was predicted to get four As at A level. She wanted to go to a high status pre 1992 university. Family problems forced her to leave home just before she sat her A levels and consequently she only achieved one B and two Cs in her results. She managed to get in to Northern University but for her this was a very last resort and a bitter disappointment.

Although illness or any life changing upsets can befall anyone irrespective of class, Kylie’s situation demonstrates the vulnerability of many working class students to such threats, even where they are strong academically, as in Kylie’s case (she has since won a conditional offer at a high status university to do a Masters in History with a view to proceeding to a PhD), in that, as in her case, without significant support networks, or economic capital to cushion the effect of the loss of family home, support or whatever, can lead to the disruption and derailment of their education.

All middle class students to varying degrees had more preparation for university than all the working class students in our study. Most were given advice by parents or family members with many having parents or relatives who had gone to university themselves. Also most had had advice and grooming from their schools or sixth form colleges. Some of this preparation was intensive. This contrasted with the working class students at Northern and Midlands who often had had a negative school experience. In some cases these students ended up at university because of the ‘second chance’ opportunity of Access courses or post 19 FE opportunities and/or being encouraged by an FE or sixth form college teacher who identified their potential. In other cases where they had left school at 16 boredom with their limited employment made them reappraise the possibilities education may offer.

This was the case for Deborah, a mature (late twenties), Engineering student, at Northern explained that she returned to College when she was twenty to do her GCSEs having left school at 16 without any qualifications. She then went on to do A
levels and felt the need to go further again. She worked throughout her studies and just at the start of her degree she had a baby:

Deborah … I’ve always had part-time jobs to support us through college and university up until um a year, well nine month ago when I had my daughter. Now I don’t work …I’ve worked as a receptionist for a ferry company for three years.

…. So that was the perfect job to see us through university and I also worked, I had two jobs: I worked in a taxi office as well in the night time, um taking calls. So it was quite, it was quite hard going, I was working over 30 hours a week as well as studying. As well as studying in my first year…Um it was because I had my own place I had to do that, I had to um provide for myself. Um so it was quite hard going, yeah quite tiring.

Working class students’ often hold academic qualifications and achievements which are tenuous in relation to the demands of their degree courses. Students who win places at Northern University for example need to achieve fewer A level or equivalent points than at Midlands or Southern; on some courses a student can gain entry on the basis of the interview, even without sufficient points, for some subjects. The majority of students who we have interviewed appear to have accessed a place at Northern through the UCAS¹ clearing system and this choice was a last resort, in most instances preferring at least the other local post 1992 university [Nortonia]. Whilst in one sense there is a clear demonstration of widening participation at its ultimate in terms of the abolition of post 16 qualifications as a basis for entry to university, there are implications and ramifications for the students’ experience of higher education, not least the high levels of attrition.

It is also however, true to say that the experiences of working class students across the four institutions is uneven. For working class students at Southern, for instance, in spite of their family crises, or economic deprivation, they achieved highly academically. These students attended comprehensive schools where they often felt out of place because of their academic success and commitment to intellectual endeavours. At Southern they, perhaps paradoxically, fit in more comfortably in spite

¹ University and College Admissions Service: UCAS is the central organisation that processes applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges
of any social anxieties they may feel: the University often represented a haven: a
haven from the challenges of their family or personal lives but more so a haven of
learning; a place where they could display their intellectual selves without being
ridiculed as odd which was the kind of experience they had had at their
comprehensive school.

Deborah’s long and arduous journey to get to university stands in stark contrast to
the sense of university entitlement most middle class students expressed. For most
of these students going to university is what they do: getting a degree is part of the
life plan. They take this for granted.

As Jenny (Law student, middle class) at Midlands said:

… there was [only] one girl who didn’t go to university in the whole [school]
year out of one hundred and twenty. I don’t think anyone would have
suggested not, it wasn’t ever an option that [you] didn’t go to university.

…you went there [to her old school] because you wanted to go to the best
universities. Cos, em, you had to apply to go into sixth form because the
system still worked on the 11plus basis. .. so em, the schools are
very academically geared because of that basis, so there was not much
there wasn’t much between the very brightest and the very lowest.

Most of the middle class students in our sample shared this experience of being
brought up in a culture of entitlement. Nurtured and groomed for university education
and future success and fulfilment. Jenny’s experience was highly competitive;
although she was diagnosed as having dyslexia she gained four A levels: an A, two
Bs and a C. Her school was a selective grammar school where they ensured the
students’ success:

Basically they did so much for us. They did all the UCAS [form – filling] for
us. They did it on one to one basis, our personal statements we wrote them
and they re-wrote them for us. It was beautifully done and they told us what
we
needed to do, what work experience we needed to do, what social activities
we needed to do, we were prepared really well because they needed to
keep up their, clearly because they wanted to do well in the league tables

And

JC: So when you arrived, given that preparation, when you arrived here at
[Midlands] did you feel very comfortable with the environment?

Jenny: Yeah it was really good. Like when we first got our first essay I’d been
taught how to do references and takes notes, no-one else knew … so it was
like very…Like taught me how to organise and structured a timetable,
basically structure and yeah organise books, references, notes.

Through these examples we can see unfolding the interplay of the structural with the
personal, the familial and social and academic experiences that constitute the
histories of these students and comprise the “system of structured structuring
dispositions” (Bourdieu 1990 p55) what Bourdieu refers to as habitus. Habitus is the
embodiment of history, “internalized as a second nature…[it] is the active presence of
the past of which it is the product.” (ibid p56). The middle class students have
learned dispositions which fit with the context of the university and are thus enabled
to generate further habitus through a range of social interactions.

As well as their schools or Colleges preparing them academically, and endowing
their habitus through the insights and experiences of passing on relevant knowledge,
in most cases their parents who either had been to university themselves or had
bought into the middle classes through entrepreneurship, added to this too, if not
directly themselves then by providing private tuition or through their social capital. For
some such as Law students they passed on their ‘professional inheritance’ either
from parent to child or indirectly from parent’s friend or relative to child (Bourdieu
1986 ##).

**Middle Class Promotion of Self-Worth - Working Class Self-Denigration**

It is not surprising given the significant amounts of cultural capital middle class
students bring to university and accumulate more once there through the
experiences outlined, that middle class students display substantial self-confidence.
Although, they talk about their anxiety on first going to university with respect to meeting new friends, they seem quickly to overcome this. They do not talk about academic anxieties in the same way. These are successful people, who have rarely if ever failed. If they don’t get good results they blame it on not having worked very hard. They describe themselves as ‘clever’ or ‘bright’, as Luke from Midlands said, even though he only achieved basic A level passes:

From a very early age, because, I’ve, this is going to sound terribly, awfully big headed but I’ve always been in sort of the brightest, been you know, I’ve always been in the top set so I’ve been getting the good grades, so I’ve always though it would have been a waste if I hadn’t [gone to university]. (Luke middle class, History Midlands.)

Contrast Luke’s self-assuredness with Mary’s (Northern, Law, working class) reticence and self-effacement:

[ Talking about her A level results] Only really the grades that I was getting cos in the mocks I got some really bad ones and I thought oh, I’m not going to get in here but other than that, not really.

JC: So the impression I get is that you are quite confident about how things are going in terms of your progress at the moment.

M: P: I think so. … I’m confident that I can do it but my big downfall is the exams and I have two next week. … So until they are out the way, I don’t know, I just, I can’t help it, because its like, I don’t know, it’s just like once I get into an exam room I’ll sit and as soon as I read the paper, the question, anything that comes into my mind I write down and then when I read it back it’s not ordered and it doesn’t always answer the question. I don’t know, it’s practically impossible to read my writing, and I’m just terrible at exams in general, they’ve always let us down.

Part of the promotion of middle-class self-worth is their promotion of their university as high status. For Southern students this is taken for granted, part of the national consciousness or doxa in Bourdieusian terms. Midlands’ students talk up their university as having excellent research, high up the University league tables, excellent members of staff educated at high status universities including Oxbridge.
In contrast students at Northern denigrate their university and in turn themselves. As we already said, those we interviewed rarely specifically chose to attend Northern but got in because they failed to get in anywhere else. They conflate their own sense of failure with that of the university.

Talking about another local post 1992 university (Nortonia) where she had thought of applying but didn’t have the confidence or useful advice from her college to do so, Mary, a Law student at Northern (referred to above) expressed her lack of confidence in her own university: “as far as I’m aware it’s more reputable than this uni is as well actually for the law course so. .”

And later she added:
I know it [Northern] had a very good media, and stuff like that, but I did think at first I wasn’t keen on coming here because, I don't know, because it wasn’t, I don't know whether it was just word of mouth how [Nortonia University] is a lot better. But I found out that actually this [Northern] has a higher pass rate than [Nortonia University] for Law, or something, or they have a, not as many people pass, but they have a higher, or something like that. I found out and thought what’s that all about? So I thought it’s not as bad as I thought, it’s not as bad as it’s like made out to be. They could do with a bit more, I don't know, a bit more credibility sort of. (Mary Law, Northern, working class)

Kylie, (Northern History, working class) was even more disparaging but like Mary confused; seemingly repeating common perceptions, not having thought through the illogicality of her comments in relation to the reality:

Well I suppose people say ‘oh I’m going to [Nortonia] [ the ‘preferable ‘ Post 1992 University].’ I mean I had two friends, one was going to [Norton]University [Pre- 1992 University] and one was going to [Cathedral] University [elite/pre- 1992 University] and they were all like ‘oh fantastic! ‘you’re going to [Cathedral] and you’re going to [Nortonia]’. And somebody asked me ‘Where are you going?’ And I said ‘[Northern]’ and it was like ‘hmm’. 

....
It does worry us that if I ever wanted to become a historian, [Northern] hasn’t got such a good reputation.

JC: Well like you said, a lot of your lecturers are very, you know…

K: Yeah, …they’re all from Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh

JC: But they’re working at [Northern].

K: Yeah, but you have to be from a really good university to lecture anywhere.

Whilst the middle class students at Midlands and Southern compete for symbolic capital, the working class students at Northern, capitulate in the undermining of their own ‘social importance’. (The w/c students at midlands quite often talk up their own university, particularly in contrast to DMU – as a form of integration/drawing in/sense of pride/identity/belonging. Very different to the experience at Northern).

Playing the ‘field’: conditions of learning

One of the great achievements of the Widening Participation Policy and strategies is that it has helped working class students to overcome to some extent that sense of place that leads to self exclusion from places where they do not feel that is rightly theirs, what Bourdieu calls agoraphobia: excluding the self from a range of public activities from which they are publicly excluded (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p72). However, getting the university place is not the end of the story for working class students. As Reay et al (2005) have said these students unlike their middle class counterparts make not one but (at least) two transitional steps in their move to higher education; the second being from one class to another (p96). On going to university working class students are faced with middle class worlds – milieu with which they are or tend to be unfamiliar and need to find or devise ways of engaging or at least coping.

Central to whether they do this or are enabled to do so, is the nature of/conditions of ‘the field’ or ‘fields’– the social and material arena in which, in this case, they are studying but also struggling and competing for scarce and yet highly desirable
resources (Bourdieu ##). The fields we are discussing here are complexly
differentiated, hierarchical both within and across the universities.

The organisation of the universities and resultant expectations or requirements of the
students across the four institutions differ widely. The FE college where the HE
students undertake vocational foundation degree courses, mainly on a part-time
basis is situated in an economically disadvantaged area that lacks the historic
cultural attributes of ‘old’ university towns. There are no bookshops or theatres in the
town. The students tend not to go to the partner University to avail themselves of the
learning resources there and nor do they identify as university students; as one
respondent wrote on the questionnaire “I’m not at university and so this does not
apply to me.” Students at this College are variously nurtured depending on the
support and personality of individual tutors.

Although extensive efforts are made at Northern University to recruit working class
students, and there are a range of systems for financial support, the loan of lap tops
and learning support, students are left increasingly to their own devices. They attend
lectures, although attendance isn’t always compulsory, and seminars but there is little
one to one tutorial time unless the student seeks it out her/himself. Rather students
are encouraged to use on-line learning support whilst according to our respondents
they want and need more opportunity to discuss questions, and ideas with a tutor
face to face.

In contrast, at Southern University and to a lesser extent Midlands, there were
regular one to one or one to two supervisions and tutorials where the expectation
was that students made substantial contributions and were challenged and
questioned by both their peers and teachers. This meant that students even if they
wanted to could not remain at the passive learner level.

Students at Southern University have to live on campus in the first year and
according to some of our respondents living off campus in subsequent years is not
common, and they are forbidden to take jobs during term time (or at least are not
supposed to). Most are young, straight from school and tend not to have other family
commitments. Their University days are intense and hard work but highly focussed.
They are immersed in their subject and the academic culture. They identify wholly
with their university. At Southern University and to a lesser degree at Midlands
University, being a student becomes the individual’s main source of identity to the extent that at Southern University being a student often fills the whole of the individual’s life – both work and social activities.

Southern University demonstrates a culture intent upon ensuring their students comply, are bound in and are acculturated in order to guarantee appropriate behaviour and responses. This University has a College system which creates the conditions for strong identification, provides a family type of support as well as providing the potential for a range of competitive relationships devised to raise the students’ commitment to both College and University life. Students live and eat in College and a personalised student support network is provided through the College based ‘academic family’. Membership of a College is highly competitive and there is a hierarchy of Colleges with some being exceedingly wealthy and therefore able to provide their students with bursaries and monetary gifts and other endowments.

Jessica, (a first year Engineering student) formerly attended a wealthy private school in London, is a member of X College, where her father had also been a member (seemingly an important factor in getting her membership). She described her College as just “throwing money” at students, who in fact don’t really need it.

The majority of Southern’s students, who come from similar middle class backgrounds, would seem unlikely to need to be acculturated in these ways, if we can generalise from our participants’ experiences. As Jessica said, X, College which she loves, is just like her old boarding school - it’s all so familiar to her.

By contrast many of the students at Northern University (70% of our questionnaire responses) and Eastern College (all of those interviewed and responded to the questionnaire), live at home. Northern students work in part time employment between 10 and 20 hours per week. Some work almost full-time to earn enough to support themselves or their families. As the first in their family to attend university they have little understanding of what is expected of them other than in the bald terms of their course requirements; they have little understanding of the potential ‘extras’ that the university can offer them particularly in regard to the social aspects of the university and how through that they can acquire social and cultural capitals. By contrast 10% of the questionnaire respondents at midlands and two of those interviewed (both working class students) lived at home, although many of these had some limited part-time employment in term time although mainly at weekends as far as we know.
At the outset, the more students withdraw from the field the less access to the means (cultural capital) or opportunity to acquire or compete for these scarce resources they will have. Although finance may be a factor in students’ decision to remain living at home, there is evidence to suggest that this is not the sole reason. One working class, high achieving Law student at Midlands for example, remained in her home city, in spite of getting offers at highly reputable universities elsewhere, as she said, “I just wanted to stay in the comfort zone of [Midlands City].” Also, although she did initially move into student Halls of Residence she only stayed there a few months and returned home. As she explained:

… I was missing home at the same time, it was probably me as well, but if I was back in the same situation I’d probably make more of an effort. I was scared of the whole situation really, but I don’t think I made an effort myself to sort of, I think I was shy of people then as well. …

Although the working class students in our study do not dwell explicitly on their social anxieties, many, especially at Northern and Midlands, demonstrate a psychic response by strategically opting out and therefore avoiding the university social milieu. In this way they eschew any injurious interactions giving rise to feeling put down or degraded (cf Charlesworth et al 2006)

The opposite seems to be the case for most middle class students at Midlands and also at Southern where they placed great emphasis on the social side of their university experience.

JC: And how important is that social side of university life for you?
S: It’s very important for me because I think without it you’d get very lonely and spend most of your time missing home and wanting to not be here and you wouldn’t enjoy it, and that would affect your work as well because you’d lose interest in that because you’d be not enjoying the rest of university. So for me it’s a very important part and I don’t really think I’d want to go through three years of university without having some good friends here who I could meet with. When you’ve been spending hours writing an essay and you just want to go out, it’s a good way to let off steam, forget about any worries or things you
have, so I think it’s a very crucial element of university. (Susan Midlands, History, Middle Class)

Susan’s experience of clubbing, going on weekend trips, mixing with different friendships groups is very common at Midlands and Southern. At Midlands also the Students’ Union is the hub of the University social life providing numerous societies and sports activities and facilities.

Most of it, well, if you want to go out for example to student nights, most of them take place here at the [Students Union] I don’t know if you’ve seen posters for YYYY and Red Mole? …They are the most popular nights and there’s one in town called Casablanca [nightclub] but in terms of going to the cinema, the city centre and things, you have to get your bus into the city centre or out that way to XXXX where the cinema is, so they mainly take place around the whole university and city centre

… Usually friends from the course or friends from halls and sometimes with both. For example, I went to Birmingham last week on a housemates for next year trip, so it was one of the girls that I’m sharing with next year. Last week I went to the cinema with some friends from halls and I spent an evening going out with my flatmate, so it varies depending upon what I’m doing, who’s free, who I want to go with, but I tend to spend most of it with either specific friends from halls, I’ve got a group of about four I’m quite good friends with, I’m not living with them next year though. Or with the girls I’m sharing with next year and sometimes my flatmate, not really general people who I’ve said once hi to in halls or anything.

In fact the typical Midlands student was described by Rebecca (Midlands, History, middle class) as:

The typical student is normally involved in at least one sports team I would say but I mean that might be my, I mean my group of friends tend to be involved in a kind of sport or a society, er definitely.

JC: And would you class yourself as one of these sorts of students? RS: Oh yes.
JC: I take it you’re involved in quite a lot of sports and things?

RS: Yes, skiing and then I was on the horse riding team but I don’t really like the horses [here]. I did a year of riding them and I have got a horse at home and I just found them a bit, they were sort of a bit unresponsive….

At Southern similarly an extensive range of social and cultural opportunities is provided through the College system.

Whilst the middle class students do talk about social anxieties, they work at negotiating their social space and place within it. As Charlesworth et al (2006) and Bourdieu (1999) have said friendships and popularity are important devices for not merely reducing solitude but for making oneself feel worthwhile, “the feeling of counting for others, being important for them, and therefore oneself and finding in the permanent plebiscite of testimonies of interest –requests, expectations, invitations – a kind of justification for existing…” (Bourdieu ibid pp240-242)

The social experience would seem to be central to these students’ motivation for going to university. For the middle class students the university experience is more holistic. On going to university they are as concerned about their social life, and making friends as about their studies. University for them is about opening up opportunities; meeting new and different people and developing their identity; for that they also need some independence from their parents.

JC: Was it part of your motivation to come to university, that side of things?

SN: The whole meeting more people and things was, and also when I’m back home, because I live a 20 minute bus ride from the nearest city which is Brighton, I do meet up with my friends back home but we tend to do the same thing and I wanted to experience new things and I did in some way want a bit of leeway from parents as well, because you think if I’m doing that will my parents say don’t do that or something like that, so that was partly a motivation yes, because I wanted to kind of expand my experience in terms of what I’d done and also living down south you don’t really get to see places like Birmingham or Coventry etc very easily, whereas [Midlands City] is very good for transport links to places. I wanted somewhere like that
where I go on a day trip to Birmingham rather than have to trek all the way up there and go there for two hours and spend the night. So yeah that was quite an aspect and I just wanted somewhere really new to be able to meet new people, because I mean I like my home town a lot but I thought if I went to university there I'd be seeing the same friends and doing the same things, I wouldn't have got quite so much out university. (Susan middle class, Midlands, History)

For these students the university provides ‘the field’ in which they can enhance their privileged selves and extract greater value than hitherto, not just in terms of the substantive knowledge of their subject of study, but in terms of social and cultural capital. Sometimes this is directly related to their future profession such as those taking Law but for others the experience is of a generalist value.

For most of the working class students, at Northern and Eastern College, and to some extent at Midlands, their degrees are a means to an end. They are pragmatic in their course and university choices; frequently they don’t have a choice at all and they become strategic learners. Financial issues are factors in this and the need for most of these students to take a part-time job. For those living at home this most often means the students continue to socialise with their home-based friends and have limited interactions at the university. Many of these working class students are time poor; their degree is not central to their lives but is fitted in around their busy, and demanding schedule of employment, domestic care and family commitments.

Conclusion

We have revealed a matrix of differences and diverse experiences across and within the four institutions in our study. The structural differences interweave with the middle class students’ capitals to perpetuate privilege and often serve to obstruct or constrain opportunities for working class students. Our interim findings show that whilst widening participation policies and strategies have opened up higher education for working class people which they would hitherto not have had, inequalities continue to exist and impact on their life chances both within and across these universities. Educational success as Bourdieu has argued entails a range of cultural behaviours; privileged children have learned these as have their teachers. Unprivileged children have not. We have shown that the university conditions, both
pedagogic and social and the means by which students are drawn into these, or not, has an impact on their engagement and the development of their identity as students. Getting them in and leaving them to it doesn't work for those who have no prior experience of university. Higher Education needs to address not only the widening of access to university but it needs to get to grips with what goes on inside the 'hallowed grounds.'

References


www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03_35.htm


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