

**Learning to Cope on Your Own:
The Reflexive Educational Trajectories of
High-Achieving, Working-Class Girls**

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for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the personal process of reflexive deliberation is informing the educational trajectories of sixteen high-achieving, working class girls. In particular, it explains how they are making noticeably different educational decisions that are leading to their proposed engagement with high-tariff universities. On the surface, their journeys resemble well-rehearsed stories of high-achieving girls who appear able to glide through education collecting high grades and paving their own ways to a bright future. Yet as young women from some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of the Liverpool City Region and with no family history of access to higher education, their proposed progression extends well beyond the possibilities inscribed in their social positioning.

Using a creative, biographical research design, the thesis incorporates first-person accounts of the girls' life and educational trajectories for the specific purpose of studying their reflexivity. Informed by Margret Archer's (2003, 2007a) theorising, this facilitates explanations of precisely how these young women respond to their involuntary social placement and the basis on which they determine their future courses of action in ways that other research does not predict for them. While they cannot make what they please of their circumstances, the thesis rekindles the role of agency in the girls' decision making. It makes the point that they are becoming increasingly skilled in reflexively navigating their own pathways through education and advance their university goals in innovative and deliberative ways.

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List of Abbreviations

A-Levels – General Certificate of Education Advanced Level Qualifications

APP – Access and Participation Plan

DfE – Department for Education

DLUHC – Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities (formerly the MHCLG)

FE – Further Education

FSM – Free School Meals

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

HE – Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institution

IMD – Index of Multiple Deprivation

LCC – Liverpool City Council

LCR – Liverpool City Region

MHCLG – Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (now the DLUHC)

NCOP – National Collaborative Outreach Programme

OfS – Office for Students

POLAR – Participation of Local Areas

QDAS – Qualitative Data Analysis Software

SATs – Standard Assessment Tests

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UK – United Kingdom

WEx – Work Experience

WP – Widening Participation

Glossary

Agents: individuals or ‘acting people’ with the particular properties to set up goals and to try to reach them (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002, p. 178)

Agency: entails subjectivity and is the intentional, but not unconstrained, action of agents. Agency is often contrasted with structure.

Autonomous Reflexivity: reflexivity that is initiated and completed through internal conversation as individuals make self-reliant decisions based on their own judgement.

Causal powers (of agents): an individual’s own human powers that are activated and exercised as they attempt to pursue a project.

Causal powers (of structure): entities that are activated by a human project and contingent on the nature of the human project entailed. They can be beneficial and detrimental to that project (see enablements and constraints).

Communicative Reflexivity: reflexivity that is initiated through internal dialogue and completed interpersonally through external dialogue with those with whom they share common points of reference.

Concerns: the ‘internal goods’ that people care about most and are elaborated into ‘projects’ (M. S. Archer, 2007a).

Constraints: structural powers that impinge upon agents as potential limitations or hindrances to their plans.

Culture: ‘all intelligibilia’, that is ‘doctrines, theories, beliefs and individual propositions’, that have the ability to be understood by someone (M. S. Archer, 2020, p. 154). Broadly defined under ‘structure’ in much of this thesis.

Enablements: structural powers that impinge upon agents as potential opportunities or assistance to their plans.

Fractured Reflexivity: when powers of reflexivity have been 'suspended' (M. S. Archer, 2003) leaving an individual unable to act and focusing on an immediate need for day-to-day survival.

High-Tariff: HE providers demanding the highest entry criteria based on a calculation of the applicant's qualifications and grades (see Chapter 4).

Meta-Reflexivity: reflexivity that is initiated and usually completed through internal dialogue that relates to issues of social justice and an obligation to act in line with personal values.

Morphogenesis: a transformation model of agency and structure in which they are distinct objects but interact with each other. Structure constrains and enables the actions of agents and the actions of agents simultaneously reproduce or transform structure (Danermark et al., 2002).

Projects: an individual's goals or aspirations that they design, redesign and pursue.

Properties: entities, including those relating to structure and culture, that an individual may encounter in pursuit of their personal project.

Similar and Familiars: usually, friends, family and other people with whom an individual shares common points of reference.

Structure: entails objectivity and a set of internally related objects with powers and mechanisms that may not be directly observable and may be part of a greater structure. Structure is the context in which action and social interaction take place. Broadly used in much of this thesis to refer also to culture.

Widening Participation: the aim of improving access and entry to HE among social groups who are typically underrepresented in university-level education.

Year 12 / Year 13: in England, these are the final two years of a young person's compulsory education, usually undertaken when they are aged between 16 to 18 years old.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

In my previous role as a teacher and sixth-form tutor, I became aware that each academic year a small number of girls from the least advantaged backgrounds were bucking a general trend in their higher education (HE) applications by opting to pursue courses at more selective universities than the majority of their peers. These were girls from an inner-city comprehensive school in Liverpool where 44.5% of pupils were eligible for free schools meals (FSM), compared to the 15.9% national average at the time (RAISEonline, 2011). They had no family history of access to HE and the majority came from the most socio-economically disadvantaged ward in the city (LCC, 2020). Yet they were engaging in the process of application and transition to high-tariff universities as they prepared to leave school in Years 12 and 13.

On the surface, their journeys resembled well-rehearsed stories of high-achieving girls. They appeared able to glide through education, collecting high grades and paving their own ways to a bright future (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). However, as young women, often in receipt of FSM, who were the first generation in their family to attend university, their journeys were very different to those of their middle-class counterparts who could replicate the 'familiar contours' of their original social settings (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 194). Inequalities still endured in these girls' everyday lives and were not offset by the fact of their academic success. Yet, somehow, they were able to work around them. Celebrated in school and by their chosen HE providers as successful recipients of widening participation (WP) initiatives, their proposed engagement with high-tariff universities was still exceptional among their peers.

Working closely alongside these girls whilst studying for a PGCE and then an MA in Education, I began to explore more critically the gendered norms and expectations they faced and developed a stronger scholarly understanding of the way these interacted with social class. This learning offered new 'ways of seeing' aspects of education (Trowler, 2012) through the interactions of power and privilege, empowerment and disempowerment. Acquiring the language and theoretical tools to explain social class differences in education, through cultural capital, habitus and

reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; Reay, 2006; Reay & Wiliam, 1999) gave me the means to write about and confidence to interrogate situations I thought I knew well. Consequently, it was researching the reasons why most girls from working-class backgrounds do not go to university that initially captured my academic interest. This seemed to be an opportunity to learn more about what could encourage their university participation. However, as has been argued elsewhere, there is much to be gained from thinking 'otherwise' (M. S. Archer, 2007a; Ball, 2006). Although I am no longer working in the same professional context, like the girls who sparked my initial curiosity and interest, it is working-class young women who have gone against the grain and are applying to high-tariff universities (see Chapter 4 for further details of the students) who have become the focus of my doctoral studies.

1.2 The UK HE Context

In this thesis, the significance of working-class girls' journeys through education and towards high-tariff universities is situated in the UK HE context. Although entry to HE among students from all socio-economic backgrounds has grown through significant change and expansion over the past thirty years (Pugsley, 2004; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005; Thompson, 2019), there is still a persistent gap between the most and least advantaged groups (Crawford, Dearden, Micklewright, & Vignoles, 2017; DfE, 2021c). These differences repeat familiar patterns of relative disadvantage that are visible among students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds throughout their education (Andrews, Robinson, & Hutchinson, 2017). Furthermore, while the rhetoric of WP might suggest that the HE context provides a place for everyone, it is not an equal place (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2020). This points to a status hierarchy among HE providers that is stratified along the lines of social class (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Croxford & Raffe, 2015) and where 'informal differences in function and standing are widely recognised' (Croxford & Raffe, 2015, p. 1625). Consequently, opportunities for students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds fail to equate to their more advantaged peers (Leathwood, 2004; Reay, 2017). As UCAS (2021b) predicts, at the current rate of progress, the gap in entry to high-tariff providers between the most and least advantaged 18 year olds will not be eliminated until the year 2352.

This context highlights the exceptionality of the decisions being made by girls from working-class backgrounds who are proposing to apply to high-tariff providers. However, the gap of 10.5 percentage points in favour of female HE participation (UCAS, 2020b) means that there is often complacency in public discourse about their education, with concerns more likely to be centred around their male counterparts (L. Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendick, 2010; Pomerantz & Raby, 2020; Skelton & Francis, 2005). Assumed to be ‘managing very well on their own’ (Francis, 2010, p. 23), girls’ experiences are often seen as peripheral and rarely framed alongside considerations of social class or the types of providers they are applying to. Yet girls from the least advantaged IMD quintile are less likely to progress to HE than their more advantaged male and female peers (UCAS, 2020b). Likewise, girls eligible for FSM are almost three times less likely to progress to a high-tariff HE provider than girls who are not eligible for FSM (Hubble, Bolton, & Lewis, 2021). While this context is discussed further in the next chapter, the overview provided here shows that not all girls are easily accessing HE and especially high-tariff providers. The thesis does not therefore assume that high-achieving, working-class girls can ‘do, be and have’ anything that they choose (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 13) but focuses on the complexities involved in their academic success.

1.3 The Local Context

Where the particular group of girls in this thesis live and study also matters to the current research, as this local context shapes outcomes for children and young people throughout their education (Dorling, 2019). All those involved reside in the Liverpool City Region¹ (LCR), an area with four HEIs and seven FECs offering degree-level provision, and their experiences will not be the same as their counterparts studying elsewhere in England. Research indicates that young people even from the most deprived wards in the Liverpool local authority are aware of the comprehensive range of options that are available to them and accessible via the transport links in the region (Wiseman et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the girls in this study are not unaffected by different aspects of deprivation that are prevalent across

¹ The Liverpool City Region consists of the local authorities: Liverpool, Knowsley, St Helens, Wirral, Sefton and Halton.

the LCR. As indicated in the UK context, these aspects are well known to influence the propensity of young people to progress to HE, in particular to the most selective institutions (Crawford, Dearden, et al., 2017; Crawford, Macmillan, & Vignoles, 2017).

Overall, the LCR has the highest level of deprivation across all other Local Enterprise Partnerships (MHCLG, 2019). This has a significant impact for young people living in this region, with nearly a quarter of them eligible for FSM (Fish, Hanson, Kithcing, Rendell, & Thompson, 2021). Not only is FSM one of the ‘most strongly correlated contextual indicators’ with low-family income (Jerrim, 2021, p. 5), but FSM pupils are significantly less likely to progress to HE by age 19 than non-FSM pupils. Indeed, the 19.1 percentage point gap between them was stronger in 2019/20 than at any other point in the last 14 years (DfE, 2021c). Furthermore, although the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) index was not designed to measure socio-economic deprivation, it does demonstrate geographical variation in the rate of HE participation among young people by classifying local areas of the UK into one of five quintiles (Jerrim, 2021). As the following chapter expands on, it is important to highlight that the LCR has a higher proportion of wards in quintile 1, designated as having the lowest HE participation, than England (Fish et al., 2021). All the girls in this study were experiencing aspects of disadvantage associated with these measures and, given the prevalence of deprivation in the LCR, the number of their peers who will also be affected is not insignificant.

There are several university schemes and charitable organisations that operate within this local context and recognise how it affects young people’s education and progression to HE in the LCR (see Chapter 2 for further discussion of the impact). However, there was one organisation in particular that corresponded to the specific backgrounds, high academic attainment and proposed progression to high-tariff universities of the young women whose journeys were the inspiration for this thesis. Its aims align closely with shifting priorities in the WP agenda that are refocusing attention on the least advantaged students’ exclusion from high-tariff providers (Boliver, 2013; OfS, 2021d; Reay, 2017). The girls in this thesis were involved in its programmes which supported with their university applications and professional skills, and I was put in touch with these students through my professional

connections with several staff members. Referred to only as the 'social enterprise' throughout the rest of this thesis, it remains anonymous to protect the identities of the girls involved. It is thanks to the support of the North West staff team between 2018 and 2019 and their interest in this research that I was able to connect with the sixteen girls from the LCR who took part.

1.4 Research Focus

In response to this background and context, this thesis sets out with the aim of explaining how a small number of working-class girls are making noticeably different educational decisions that are leading to their proposed application to high-tariff universities. It draws on the contributions of sixteen young women aged between 16 and 18 from the LCR who, for the reasons outlined below, are referred to principally as 'girls' throughout the rest of the thesis. All have the high predicted A-level grades needed for entry to highly selective HE providers yet come from backgrounds that have been proposed in this thesis as proxies for 'working-class' (expanded on in Chapter 4). With a dearth of current research that investigates the educational decision making of high-achieving girls from working-class backgrounds, the thesis makes an important contribution to knowledge about how these particular girls are proposing to apply to high-tariff universities. It makes the point that their journeys are not simple stories of how to turn disadvantage into advantage but show the creative and deliberative ways in which working-class girls progress their educational plans against the constraining and enabling effects of their objective positioning.

1.4.1 The 'Girls'

Recognising that language has power, 'girl' is a term that will be used deliberately and affirmatively throughout the rest of the thesis to voice the experiences of the individuals who contributed to the research. While their male counterparts might be referred to as 'lads' or 'guys' there are few comparable terms to describe teenage female students. In some contexts, using the term 'girls' to refer to young women could be considered as belittling or signal immaturity. However, reactions to the term 'girl' also depend on who is using it (Dyhouse, 2013). It is a word that is used dialectally to refer to both young and adult women in the LCR and thus a word that was broadly used by the girls to refer to themselves and each other during the

research activities. There is certainly no universal answer to who a 'girl' is and, as the thesis later explains, the differences between them need as much attention as the features that they share (Harris, 2004).

1.4.2 Being Working-Class

The research uses established objective measures (detailed in Chapter 4) for the practical purpose of identifying the girls involved in this study as 'working-class'. Importantly, however, it also recognises that this neat way of classifying students is too simplistic to convey the subtleties and nuances of what being working-class really means for them. Mediated by their gender, it is a cultural category of importance in the girls' lives that structures their 'resources, experiences and subjectivities' throughout their educational trajectories (Thompson, 2019, p. 20). As such, it adds complexity to the ways they 'think, feel, act, judge, discern and prioritise' in relation to their decision making (Reay et al., 2005, p. 16). Influencing many different aspects of their lives and education, the way in which class works, shifts and changes in the education system is explored more in Chapter 2. However, details of what being working-class means for the particular group of girls in this study are developed through the findings presented in Chapter 5.

1.4.3 Glossary

There are a range of different terms invoked throughout the thesis. Many are drawn from Margaret Archer's (2003, 2007a, 2012) theorising and the principles of critical realism that underpin it and, like the nature of reality itself, may not be immediately obvious to a reader. The Glossary (p.14) offers some succinct definitions of the language with which the thesis attempts to describe and explain the educational decision making of the high-achieving, working-class girls. These will be developed across different parts of this thesis but offer a useful starting point with which to begin.

1.5 Conceptual Tools

To account for the variability as well as regularity in the educational decision making of working-class girls who are similarly objectively situated, the thesis draws on Margaret (M. S.) Archer's work (1995, 2003, 2007a, 2010a, 2012). With its

foundations in critical realism, Archer's philosophical positioning provides a valuable lens with which to recognise that there are always deeper levels of understanding awaiting discovery, beyond direct observation. It contends that reality exists with considerable autonomy and, in spite of people's best efforts to predict it, does not always act according to expectation. Her grounding within this approach thus has explanatory value when studying the complexity of events that do not follow predictable patterns or routines. Applied here as a 'tool for exploration and for thinking otherwise' (Ball, 2006, p. 64), this includes the proposed progression of working-class girls to high-tariff universities.

Unlike in frameworks that are more established in the field of education (Boudon, 1974; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the thesis uses Archer's work to present new explanations of working-class girls' educational decision making and trajectories. Using her specific terminology as a 'different way of seeing' (Trowler, 2012, p. 282), it recognises the girls' personal 'concerns' and their 'aspirations and designs' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 54) to attend high-tariff universities and pursue professional careers. However, it does not lose sight of the 'differentially advantageous places' from which they start their education and the 'different life chances' that this entails (2007a, p. 54). They are not free from having to deal with the economic, social and cultural factors that relate to their social background and the national and local contexts described above. However, the way in which they confront these 'structural and cultural properties' (2007a, p. 97) is mediated by reflexivity.

Reflexivity is therefore a central concept in this thesis, explained further in Chapter 3, that acts as a bridge between structure and human agency (M. S. Archer, 2003). Set within Archer's morphogenetic approach (1995, 2003), both structure and agency are distinct strata of reality and it is their interaction over time, through reflexivity, that leads to transformation and change in society as much as to reproduction. Reflexivity thus enables people to 'consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and vice versa' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 4). However, it is the individual nature of reflexivity that is key to explaining precisely what the girls in this thesis make of their involuntary social placement and the basis on which they determine their future courses of action. According to Archer (2007a, p. 11), reflexivity is 'radically

heterogeneous'. This is key to how the working-class girls in this thesis buck a general trend in their proposed HE engagement, and 'enables us to explain the *universal absence of similar responses in situations that are objectively similar*' (M. S. Archer, 2010b, p. 10).

1.6 Research Questions

Drawing on critical realism as a theoretical 'underlabourer' (Mutch, 2017) to the research in this thesis shifts its focus from the 'what' to the 'how' of the working-class girls' remarkable trajectories towards high-tariff universities. It recognises that their proposed progression does not happen by chance or without reason, and thus focuses attention on the 'causal powers' that have made it happen (Danermark et al., 2002). This involves seeking to provide an explanation of the contexts and conditions in the girls' trajectories that are informing their decision making, as well the capabilities of the students themselves as they subjectively respond to them. The research has therefore been guided by the aim outlined above, to explain how a small number of working-class class girls are making noticeably different educational decisions that are leading to their proposed application to high-tariff universities.

The research questions associated with this aim are also ontologically orientated and accept Margaret Archer's invitation to 'explore the interplay between social conditioning and agential responses' (2010b, p. 12). Drawing on her concept of morphogenesis (1995, 2003) to do so (see Chapter 4 for further explanation of how this informed the research methodology and design), they are devised to open up explanations about how structures constrain and enable the actions of agents, and how agents reproduce and transform structures over time (Danermark et al., 2002). In this way, together, the questions seek an explanatory account of the 'form' and 'ingredients' involved in the shaping of the girls' trajectories (Porpora, 2013). Rather than relying on generalisations about probable courses of action, they appreciate that the educational trajectories of working-class girls are always shaped and cannot be predetermined by asking:

- How do factors relating to social class and gender influence high-achieving, working-class girls' relationships with education?

- How do high-achieving, working-class girls respond to these factors, leading to their engagement with education and proposed application to high-tariff universities?
- How does reflexivity inform their decision-making processes?

To answer these questions, the thesis uses a creative qualitative and biographical design, developed in Chapter 4, that assigns an active role to the young women involved. While they might not be aware of the complex combination of social factors that explain their actions (Caetano, 2015b), this accepts their ‘self-warrant’ to explain their own educational trajectories (M. S. Archer, 2007b). Drawing on creative methods of research to prioritise their contributions and work at a pace and via a means relevant to them, each girl created a ‘map’ of her educational and life experiences and most used a cardboard cut-out of a person to record their future plans. These personal creations then supported individual, face-to-face interviews. Together these were analysed through a dual approach that was attentive both to key themes arising from the data, as well as the girls’ individual reflexivity.

1.7 Thesis Road Map

The thesis is presented through six chapters. The brief introduction in this chapter has set the scene for what follows, including the rationale for this research and its specific focus. Key themes relating to social class, gender and access to HE are expanded in the literature review in the next chapter, as well as the historical, ideological and political context in which the girls are making their HE decisions. Chapter 2 thus draws out what is already known about the educational trajectories of working-class girls and their applications to high-tariff universities. It highlights some of the reasons why they are currently underrepresented in these highly selective providers, but also the lack of current research that explains why they might decide to apply. It is within this chapter that theoretical approaches to issues of university decision making are presented using the existing literature, and the thesis begins to explain why it departs from them.

Chapter 3 subsequently presents the theoretical framework in much more detail than could be included in the current introductory chapter. It explains its departure from more ‘popular’ accounts of the relationship between structure and agency (M. S.

Archer, 2016, p. 152). Instead, using Margaret Archer's theorising, it outlines the novel approach the thesis adopts to explaining variations in working-class girls' educational trajectories. This chapter, and specifically the concept of morphogenesis, is entwined with the thesis's methodological positioning and therefore leads into Chapter 4, the methodology. Chapter 4 clarifies how Archer's framework informs the qualitative and biographical design of the research, which is intended to generate understanding with the girls involved through creative and participatory methods. It gives further information about the sixteen girls, their working-class backgrounds, high-achievement and intended university progression. Furthermore, it includes important discussion of the research's validity and ethical values.

Using the data gathered through analysing the girls' life-maps, future people and interviews, Chapter 5 then offers new insights into the educational decision making of working-class girls as they apply to high-tariff providers. Its findings focus on the girls' engagement with constraints and enablements that simultaneously hinder and promote their pathways to university, as well as the reflexive ways they are learning to deal with them. Overall, it shows the striking ways that the girls in this research are responding to their circumstances, rather than becoming an integral part of them. This then leads into Chapter 6, the concluding part of the thesis, which focuses on the contribution the research makes to knowledge, considers its implications for policy and practice, and makes suggestions for future work that will build on what has been presented here.

1.8 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter acts as an introduction to what is to follow. It has offered an overview of the research context, which will be developed in the following chapter and highlights the significance of the university decisions being made by the girls in this study. Importantly, the chapter has presented and explained the research aim and questions for the first time, as well as summarising how they guide the research design. In doing so, it has provided an initial insight into the theoretical tools that frame this study, in particular the central concept of reflexivity. As the final section outlined, much of the present chapter will be expanded on elsewhere. This begins with further explanation in Chapter 2 of the context in which the girls are pursuing

their education and the theoretical approaches to issues of social class, gender and HE participation that are used in other studies. It will thus identify pertinent gaps in the existing literature that the current thesis intends to address.

Chapter 2

Literature Review: Understanding Social Class, Gender and HE Decision Making

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores existing research relevant to the thesis. This is used to draw out what is already known in relation to the educational trajectories of high-achieving, working-class girls and their applications to high-tariff universities. It includes the historical, ideological and political contexts in which they are making their educational decisions, and the reasons why they are currently underrepresented within these institutions. The chapter shows that there are many commonalities in why working-class girls might not apply to high-tariff universities, but currently few studies that consider why they might do so. In this way, it also examines what is not known in relation to the educational trajectories of high-achieving, working class girls and highlights where gaps in existing research are situated. This includes drawing attention the conceptual and theoretical approaches adopted by other studies in relation to university ‘choice’ making and how the current study both builds on and departs from what has already been done in this area. Overall, it emphasises the notability of the decisions being made by the high-achieving, working-class girls in this thesis. By explaining how they buck an enduring trend in attainment and HE participation, this chapter provides a useful and necessary foundation for the thesis.

2.2 Working-Class History

The meaning of being ‘working-class’ has been increasingly explored and deconstructed in sociological research that argues there is no single, concrete definition that can adequately capture its complexity (L. Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Weis & Dolby, 2012). Nonetheless, as a central concept in the current thesis, it is important to begin this chapter by situating this social class within a broader, historical context that offers a useful background to patterns of disadvantage experienced by the students in the current study. This starts by showing how over the last century and a half, Britain’s class landscape has changed significantly. When the working class was created in the period following the industrial revolution in the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its culture emerged from 'people's first-hand experiences of interdependence at work and in their neighbourhoods' (K. Roberts, 2011, p. 107). By the first world war, the working class comprised the majority of the population (K. Roberts, 2011). Yet it only began to be studied thoroughly by sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s when it was believed to be changing in fundamental ways. Alongside full employment and economic growth in the post-war period, earnings were rising and goods and services, such as cars and televisions, became more accessible to manual workers. As K. Roberts (2011, p. 107) describes, a 'non-traditional, privatized and instrumentally orientated' working class was being created.

Pertinent to this thesis, education has been a key site in which to explore social class since this time. It was within this context that Willis's (1978) seminal study followed a group of 'non-academic working-class boys' as they left school and entered work in the early 1970s. It observes how they drew on an 'unofficial and informal self-preparation for work' that manoeuvred around and often discredited formal standards (p. 160). For these young men, school was something that occupied time before starting work. Yet from the 1970s, deindustrialisation and the steady decline in manual jobs (Allen & Ainley, 2013) particularly in the youth labour market (Thompson, 2019) saw a growth in credentialism that has since resulted in increased value being placed by young people on school and qualifications (Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2012). At the same time, changing employment opportunities meant that the working class gradually decreased in size and was reshaped from a working class of 'mines, steelworks and factories to one of supermarkets, call centres and offices' (Jones, 2016). In the context of the spread of unemployment and job insecurity, stalling social mobility and an increase in poverty, the working class 'declined drastically as a cultural and political force' (K. Roberts, 2011, p. 15).

In contrast to the post-war period where social class was a crucial lens for analysis and explanation of social change (Woodin, 2007), since the 1980s the language of social class has been 'frequently buried as redundant, out of date, too crude and simplistic to tell us much about the complex society England has become' (Reay, 2017, p. 7). As Woodin (2007, p. 485) points out, paradoxically, its passage in public life to a 'state of virtual oblivion' has taken place during a period of increasing

economic and social inequality. It is argued that these claims to 'classlessness' allow the notion of class to be detached from political explanations of inequality. In this way, Lawler (2005) asserts that 'people on the losing end of a classed system can increasingly be blamed' (p. 798). In the context of education, class does periodically intrude in public discourse, such as in recent 'moral panics' (Reay, 2017) around white working-class students' educational attainment (Education Committee, 2014, 2021). However, where it is used it can be argued that class becomes a 'stigmatised, spoiled identity, rather than one which people acknowledge with pride' (Bradley, 2016, p. 100). As Reay (2018b) argues, this acts as a 'smokescreen' that is the 'antithesis of educational fairness'. It is the persons themselves, rather than the class system, who come to be marked as deficient or lacking in some way in explanations of inequality. Although generally the language of class may have been 'linguistically expunged' (Lawler, 2005), the concept has not been completely abolished. Instead, it is presented in different ways through more fragmented categories such as the 'socially excluded' or children in receipt of FSM (Woodin, 2007). As Woodin (2007) describes, working class has become an 'absent presence' rarely spoken of yet pervasive.

Similar to its history in public discourse, the concept of class in sociological research has undergone periods of fluctuation, where its salience in academic discourse has both risen and fallen. Weis and Dolby (2012) describe how in recent years social class has been given increasing attention in two ways, both as a key signifier of positionality and in relation to growing social and economic inequalities. In the context of educational research in the UK, issues of social class have been predominantly addressed in relation to compulsory schooling (L. Archer, 2003). In contrast to the thesis at hand, there has been a tendency to focus on the educational failure of the working classes (Rowell, 2016). Indeed, K. Roberts (2011, p. 4) asserts that the question of why working-class children are out-performed in school has been 'investigated to exhaustion'. As Rowell (2016) outlines, it is not until the turn of the 21st century that there has been a small growth in research, like the thesis, that is interested in working-class academic success, rather than working-class educational 'failure'. This gradual development has taken place predominantly in the context of HE, in line with recent increases in student participation, the increased focus on WP, and public discourse that university level credentials are necessary for success

(Rowell, 2016). Therefore, she argues that in recent years working-class experience of HE has been 'placed under sociological scrutiny' (p. 97). What has been less well scrutinised, however, are the experiences that are leading working-class students to apply in the first place. While the context of increased participation and the focus on WP are foregrounded in the sections that follow, it is high-achieving, working-class girls' *proposed* engagement with high-tariff universities that is the main area of focus for the thesis.

2.2.1. The Complexities of Class

Importantly, social class alone is not the only aspect of difference or social inequality that may affect the 'lifestyle and life chances' of the working-class girls in the current study (Bradley, 2016, p. 29). In contrast to class, race and gender have shorter histories of recognition as socially constructed categories. While race was usually treated as a scientific category until the second world war, differences in the lives of men and women were considered to be part of their biological nature until the 1960s (K. Roberts, 2011). It is therefore not until the latter part of the twentieth century that divisions of race and gender became important issues for sociology. In the context of educational research, this means that many earlier theories have been framed from a white, male norm and have ignored how the 'the meanings and effects of class will qualitatively change across time/space, 'race' and gender' (L. Archer, 2003, p. 18). More recently, attention has also been drawn to how class is also stratified by other social categories, such as disability, sexuality and religion (Bradley, 2016). It should also be acknowledged that the classification of students as 'female' or 'male' in national statistics and educational research means that non-binary students are rarely accounted for (Richardson, Mittelmeier, & Rienties, 2020). Reay's (2017, p. 5) assertion that there are 'very many ways of being working class' is therefore salient, and includes those whose experiences are often overlooked.

Whilst recognising the significance of other social dimensions of identity, the thesis chooses to highlight the particular complexities of being female and working class in education. Contributing to what Rowell (2016) highlights as the small growth in research that is interested in working-class academic success, the particular focus is on how application to high-tariff HEIs is mediated through the double bind of class and gender for high-achieving, working-class girls. As is explored later in this chapter

(section 2.11), this is a theme that arguably constitutes a silent 'unsaid' in the moral panic that surrounds the educational 'failure' of working class boys and assumes that girls are managing very well on their own (Francis, 2010).

2.3 Expansion in the UK HE Sector

To highlight the notability of the HE decisions being made by the high-achieving, working-class girls in the current study, who are proposing to engage with high-tariff universities, it is useful to show how their journeys are situated among claims of increased HE participation. Over the past sixty years there has been considerable change and growth in the UK HE sector. The publication of a report by the Robbins committee in the early 1960s proposed that HE courses should be 'available to all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so' (Tight, 2015). Following its publication, a period of considerable expansion took place that can be associated with establishing UK HE as a 'system' for the first time (Tight, 2015). This expansion continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with the number of university entrants rising by 150% between 1970 and 1989 (Reay et al., 2005, p. 2). Yet despite these years of expansion, as Egerton and Halsey (1993, p. 183) found, there had been 'no diminution in relative social class inequality' in access to HE since the 1900s. Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the UK HE sector experienced a further period of significant change and expansion, with polytechnics and colleges redesigned as universities. By 1996 this redefinition of what counts as higher education saw participation rates in HE rise to above 33% for the first time (Reay et al., 2005).

The removal of the binary line between further and higher education thus offered a framework for a move to mass HE, symbolic of the 50% target for participation in HE set by Blair's Labour government in 1999. As Pugsley (2004) suggests, this time period also marked a significant shift in the political perception of mass HE and large scale expansion became more readily accepted across the political parties. These changes opened up HE to groups of young people and adults who may not have previously considered higher level study, alongside a political rhetoric of widening access for all and 'meritocratic equalisation' (Reay et al., 2005, p. 9). Indeed, Boliver (2013) shows how the statement in a 2003 government White Paper (DfES, 2003) that 'those who have the potential to benefit from higher education should have the

opportunity to do so' marked a clear growth in recognition of contextual information in the discussion of equality of access in the forty years since the Robbins report. Therefore, while the current thesis highlights the persistence of relative inequalities, it must also recognise that expansion has resulted in HE becoming more inclusive (Thompson, 2019). It has extended opportunities to students from all backgrounds, including the working-class girls in this study, who are able to access a university education. From a functionalist perspective, it can be argued that they are better off than had it not occurred.

2.4 Gaps in HE Participation

From 2015, the granting of degree awarding powers to colleges and alternative providers (DBIS, 2015) meant that there were over 162 HE institutions, excluding further education colleges, in the UK (UniversitiesUK, 2017). More recently, the move to registration with the Office for Students (OfS) means that in England alone there are currently 416 officially registered HE providers (OfS, 2022a). The expansion of HE has been concurrent with the growth in participation, and in 2020 students were more likely than ever before to enter some form of HE at age 18. Across England, the entry rate for 18-year-olds in the years when most of the girls in this study were planning to apply were 34.1% in 2019 rising to 37% in 2020 (UCAS, 2021b). Yet although it has been almost 30 years since Egerton and Halsey (1993, p. 183) published their work on trends in access to HE, the patterns they identified in 'unchanging relative social class disadvantage' are still apparent. While the rate of entry to HE has grown among students from all socio-economic backgrounds, little progress has been made in recent years towards narrowing the gap in entry between the most and least advantaged groups. Government statistics show a gap between FSM and non-FSM progression rates that has risen each year since 2013/14 to 19.1 percentage points for the 2019/20 cohort (DfE, 2021c). As a result, pupils in receipt of FSM, like the girls in the current study, are still far less likely to go to university compared to pupils who do not claim FSM. Notably, however, this varies by region with the gap in Inner London significantly lower at 11% than the gap of 22% between students in the North West of England where the research for the thesis is undertaken (DfE, 2021c).

While Jerrim (2021) describes FSM as the ‘best available marker’ for childhood poverty, the POLAR index, introduced in Chapter 1, classifies areas of the UK into quintiles according to the level of young people’s participation in HE. Between quintile 1, the areas with the lowest HE participation, and quintile 5, the areas with the highest HE participation, the gap in participation by age 19 remains high at 30.4% for the 2019/20 cohort (DfE, 2021c). Furthermore, it is significant that in London only 1.3% of local areas are classified as quintile 1, whereas the figure is considerably larger in the North West of England, at 20.3%, replicating similar regional differences in progression to university shown by FSM (HEFCE, 2017). This is also highlighted in the map presented here (Figure 1), showing the prevalence of local areas in quintiles 1 and 2 across the LCR, where the current research was undertaken (OfS, 2021f).

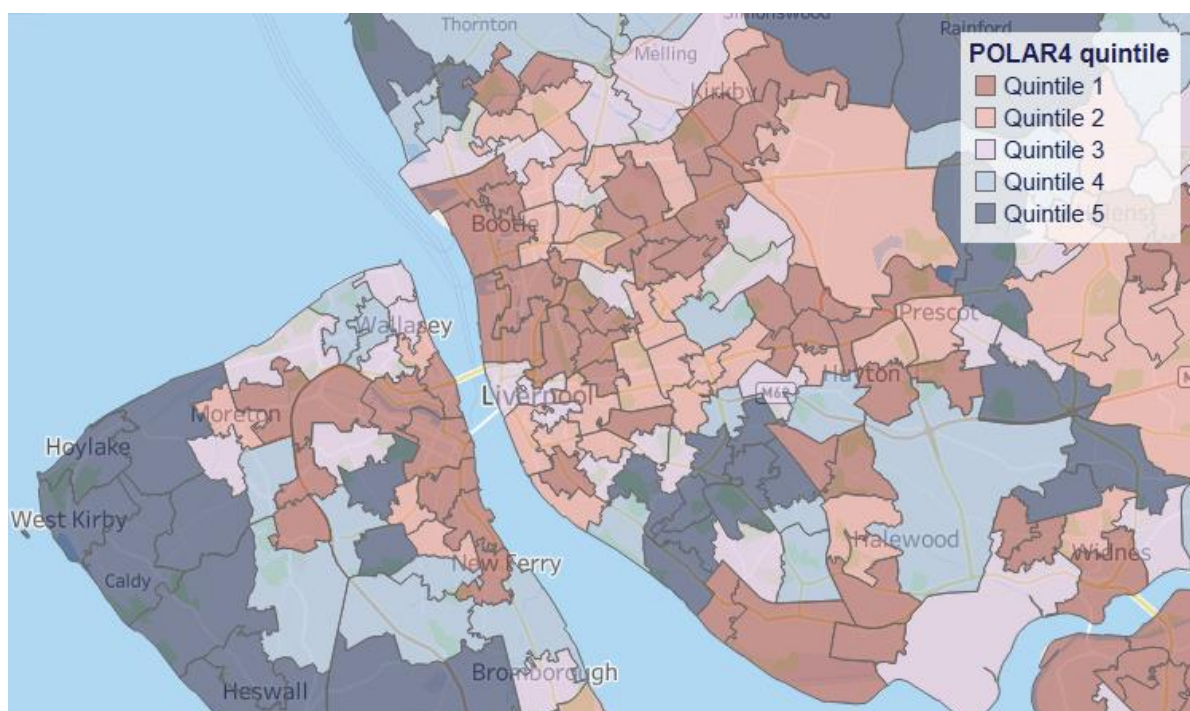


Figure 1: Map of Participation in the Liverpool City Region (POLAR4)

More specifically, as Figure 2 demonstrates, the LCR has a higher proportion of wards in quintile 1 than England and the rest of the North West (Fish et al., 2021). Together, these measures reinforce the notability of the intended progression rates of the girls in this thesis who are bucking local and national trends.

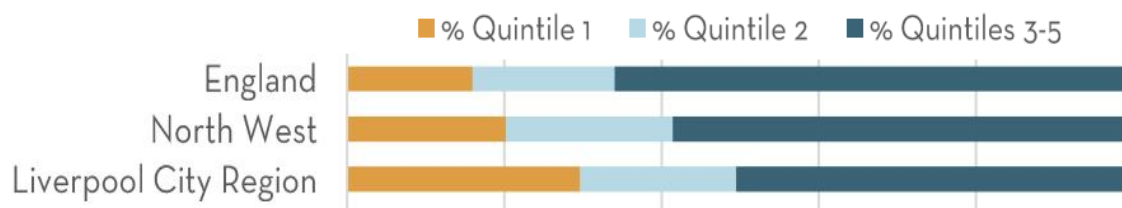


Figure 2: Comparison of Proportion of Areas in POLAR4 Quintile Groups

2.5 The Impact of Attainment

The differences shown in HE participation repeat familiar patterns of relative disadvantage that are visible among students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds throughout their education (Andrews et al., 2017). The disparity in their entry rates to HE compared to those from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds has therefore been widely associated with attainment at school at age 16 and 18 (Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013; Dearing, 1997; Dorling, 2016). While attainment has increased among all students, mirroring the increased rates of entry to HE, the relative gap in attainment indicates that children from more advantaged backgrounds are able to meet entry criteria for progression to HE in greater numbers and at more selective institutions than their less advantaged peers (DfE, 2020). It has previously been argued that differences in HE participation rates are substantially reduced when prior attainment is considered (Chowdry et al., 2013), however, Crawford, Dearden, Micklewright and Vignoles's (2017) research is the first to show that taking into account students' grades, qualifications and subjects at age 16 can explain the entirety of the gap in access among the richest and poorest students. Since poor achievement in secondary school plays such a significant role in university entry, they emphasise the importance of early intervention to substantially increase attainment by the time students from the poorest background leave school. This strengthens the need for research relating to HE participation, such as the present study, to consider working-class students' earlier experiences of school and the role this plays in their high academic achievement and proposed pathways into HE.

Nevertheless, despite being able to explain the socio-economic gap in access to universities by using attainment at age 16 years, this is not the case with high-tariff

institutions. When Crawford, Dearden, et al. (2017) considered only high status institutions they found a small, yet significant, 4% gap between the richest and poorest students that cannot be explained by prior attainment. Although they cannot explain whether this is a result of fewer applications or acceptance of places among the poorest students, it is clear that there are other factors at play besides attainment that have led to fewer of the most disadvantaged students attending one of these institutions. In her discussion of 'fair access', Boliver (2013, p. 346) writes that a 'significant limitation of equating access with entry is that it conflates the choices that prospective students make about which universities to apply to with the decisions universities make about whom to admit'. By making this distinction, it becomes apparent that it is at the point of application that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged (Boliver, 2013; Boliver, Banerjee, Gorard, & Powell, 2022). Compared to their comparably qualified peers from higher class backgrounds, they are less likely to apply to high tariff institutions (Campbell, Macmillan, & Wyness, 2019) and need to be better qualified 'by as much as an A-grade A-level before they are as likely to apply to Russell Group universities' (Boliver, 2013, p. 539). This reinforces the notability of the decisions being made by the girls in the current study, which addresses the need for greater understanding of the least advantaged students' decision making leading up to the point of application to HE. Its focus on high-achieving girls' proposed engagement with high-tariff universities responds to the gap in knowledge about the other factors at play besides attainment.

2.6 The Focus on Widening Participation

To address differences in students' 'propensities to apply' (Boliver, 2013, p. 347), encouraging more students to consider university through a focus on WP has been an important part of the UK government agenda over the past twenty years. This has primarily targeted young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, like the girls in this study, alongside other 'underrepresented' groups². Although seemingly

² The OfS (2020) considers underrepresented groups to include: students from areas of low higher education participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status; some black, Asian and minority ethnic students; mature students; disabled students; care leavers; carers; people estranged from their

contradictory, the recommendation for the introduction of loans and fees for HE in the Dearing Report (1997) was offered alongside an intensification of government led support for the WP agenda across the HE sector. This led to the introduction of collaborative initiatives, such as AimHigher (2004-11), the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (2015-17), the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (2017-19) and the current Uni Connect Programme (Houghton, Armstrong, & Okeke, 2021). However, the Dearing Report also recommended that institutions demonstrating a commitment to and robust strategy for WP be given priority in the allocation of funding for their expansion. Subsequently, the reform to fees payments in the 2004 Higher Education Act and later the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act have meant that HE providers wishing to charge above the basic fee amount were required to submit plans to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and currently to the Office for Students (OfS) outlining how they will improve equality of opportunity in HE for students such as the working-class girls in the current study.

With the possibility of charging tuition fees of up to £9250, and removal of institutions' obligation to provide means tested bursaries following the 2010 Browne Review, the current 'Access and Participation Plans' are central to the universities regulator's agenda to address inequalities. Relevant to the focus of the thesis, this includes the target to 'eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups [POLAR quintiles 5 and 1] by 2038-39' (OfS, 2021d). The distinction between not only 'who goes to university but also where they go' (Boliver, 2013, pp. 344-345) is an important one for the current study and reflects the growing focus by the government and the OfS on the least advantaged students' exclusion from particular types of universities that has previously been overlooked (Reay, 2017). Yet although HE providers invested a total of £220.6 million to support access into HE through their Access and Participation Plans in 2019-20 (OfS, 2021a), ambitious targets and high spending are not a guarantee of change. This is reflected in the gap between state school and private school A-level students' entry to the most selective providers by age 19, which is reported in the 2019/20 academic year as 24.9% and 56.7% respectively (DfE,

families; people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; refugees; children from military families.

2021c). Similarly, although 2019 saw the largest year-on-year decrease in the gap in entry rates to high-tariff HEIs between students from POLAR quintiles 5 and 1, as section 2.4 illustrates, it was a reduction from a very high baseline (UCAS, 2020a). The girls in the thesis might thus be seen as successful recipients of WP policies and initiatives, but their proposed HE engagement is still exceptional among their peers.

Furthermore, despite the current rhetoric around widening access to high-tariff universities that positions high-achieving students from disadvantaged background as 'assets' for meeting WP targets (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, & Francis, 2015, p. 10; Cunningham & Samson, 2021), the pace of change is still very slow. At the current rate of progress, the gap in entry to high-tariff HEIs between the most and least advantaged 18 year olds will not be eliminated until the year 2352 (UCAS, 2021b). Indeed, if attainment patterns continue then by 2026 high-tariff HEIs would need to recruit all current entrants with 3 A-levels, regardless of the grades they have achieved, in order to remain on track to achieve the OfS's long-term target to eliminate the gap (Turhan, 2020a, p. 42). Consequently, Turhan (2020b) argues that 'radical change' is needed to address underrepresentation at high-tariff universities, which requires these institutions, government and other stakeholders to tackle inequalities throughout the education system not only at the point of transition. Contributing to this, the research for the thesis draws attention to factors that are leading to working-class girls' proposed engagement with high-tariff universities over the course of their educational trajectories, rather than offering only a snapshot of their decision making at age 18.

2.7 Shifting University Contexts

To understand who participates in HE and where they go necessitates an understanding of the shifting university contexts over the past thirty years. This takes into account the history of diversification and stratification in the UK HE sector and is of particular interest to the thesis because it once again highlights the notability of the HE pathways proposed by the girls involved in the research. Framed within a discourse of equality, opportunity and choice, the expansion of the HE sector since 1992, including recent changes to registration with the regulatory body, has increased the choice of supplier for potential applicants. Writing in 1993, shortly after the integration of colleges and polytechnics into the HE sector in 1992, Egerton and

Halsey (1993, p. 192) predicted that 'it may be that the ending of the binary divide in the UK will negate traditional distinctions between institutions but foster the emergence of a new hierarchy of institutions'. The expansion was intended to make HE study more accessible to all, offering students a wider range of opportunities at an institution to suit their interests and needs. Yet as Pugsley (2004) points out these changes exemplify the introduction of market principles in HE which have led to 'a dramatic shift towards consumerism in education'. Coupled with the introduction of OfS as the regulatory body, which has made it easier for private providers to register as HE providers since 2017, Welch (2020) describes expansion as introducing 'hyper-competition' to the system. As Bathmaker et al. (2016, p. 7) explain 'since 1992 the various universities have fought to distinguish themselves from each other'. This includes through mission statements, the forming of alliances and 'brand' marketing.

In addition, with the introduction of tuition fees, the financial burden of HE has shifted from the 'public purse' to the individual through the system of student loans (Bathmaker et al., 2016). With student debt now configured as a normative university experience, applicants are searching for value for money in their degrees and are even found to express positive views about debt as means of securing high-level careers (C. Evans & Donnelly, 2018; Harrison, Chudry, Waller, & Hatt, 2015). This reflects the characterisation of HE as a 'private good' (Allen & Ainley, 2013, p. 71) that is justified by the notion of a 'graduate premium' leading to enhanced opportunities for students upon finishing their degree (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p. 54). As Allen and Ainley (2013) describe, the reforms mark a move from 'an era of free HE in favour of one where attending university was regarded as an 'investment''. They argue that the change has effectively introduced a 'free-market' where 'institutions compete for student customers and charge them 'what the market will bear'' (2013, p. 71). Announcing the removal of the 'artificial' cap on student numbers, the then Minister for Universities and Science, David Willets, claimed to be part of 'the first government to actually live up to the Robbin's principle' by 'setting universities free to respond to the choices of individuals' (Willets, 2014). Yet within this context, the rhetoric of choice and discourse of individualism mask important issues of segregation and ranking between institutions in 'a very unlevel playing field' (Reay, 2017).

In their research into the dimensions of differentiation among HE institutions in the UK, Croxford and Raffe (2015, p. 1626) explain that 'education markets tend to reinforce academic hierarchies, rather than encourage institutions to compete on the quality and relevance of their programmes'. They suggest that markets are likely to strengthen the position of institutions with existing reputational advantage rather than introduce a more pluralist system. Their findings show that the UK HE system is 'vertically' differentiated in line with institutional status and the capacity to attract well-qualified and high-status students. As Egerton and Hasley predicted in 1993, rather than producing a more inclusive higher education, diversity within the HE sector has resulted in an increasingly polarised system. In this way, Leathwood (2004, p. 34) asserts that 'despite the invaluable contributions that the polytechnics/post-1992 sector has made [...] there are considerable funding differences, and many of these institutions still tend to be seen as of lower status'. At the opposite end of the hierarchy, Bathmaker et al. (2016, p. 7) highlight how 'Cambridge, Oxford and London still constitute an elite tier which acquires a huge proportion of available research funding and can attract the best qualified undergraduates' (2016, p. 7). They argue that the current HE system involves both 'elite' and 'mass' forms of HE at the same time, which like the hierarchy identified by Croxford and Raffe (2015) is deeply embedded in the wider social structure. Consequently, the HE context provides a 'place' for everyone but it is not an equal 'place' (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2020). Within the current research, it is thus important to understand how structures that the girls encounter in their proposed engagement with HE may appear fair and accessible but are still divided along class lines.

2.8 The Meritocratic Paradigm

From a political perspective, the educational journeys of the high-achieving, working-class girls in the thesis might be recognised as being based on intelligence, talent and hard work. As Reay (2017) argues, the elitism among institutions with higher status and positional value is justified on the basis that universities operate in a meritocratic system, where educational choice is based on effort and ability. Indeed, as she explains, the 'meritocratic paradigm [...] has been a cornerstone of liberal and social democratic thought for the last two centuries' (2017, p. 122) and was affirmed by the Robin's committee in their statement that higher education should be

available to all who 'are qualified by ability and attainment' (NCIHE, 1963). Since meritocracy suggests that young people have equal opportunities to prove themselves, the resulting inequalities by the system's winners and losers are justified. Unequal HE participation rates are consequently treated 'as a natural aspect of a functioning society' not as a social problem (L. Archer, 2003, p. 8). Yet within education, Reay argues that this is a 'fantasy' and describes meritocracy as 'the educational equivalent of the emperor with no clothes, all ideological bluff with no substance' (2017, p. 123). It might be tempting to believe that the girls in the current study are the deserved beneficiaries of individual social mobility. In reality, as existing research shows, this is a system that misrecognises privilege for ability and thus legitimises the social exclusion of the majority of working-class students at elite institutions.

Despite the rhetoric of choice in the market of HE, the 'myth' of meritocracy means that opportunities for the least privileged students at elite institutions fail to equate to those of their more advantaged peers. Combined with an increasingly stratified HE system and precarious labour market, middle-class young people and their families 'display increasingly competitive behaviours in their attempt to stay ahead' (Bathmaker, 2021, p. 77). It is also argued that they have access to a 'hidden curriculum' surrounding university status and future recruitment opportunities that is unavailable to working-class students, who are more likely to attend lower tariff institutions and courses with clear occupational outcomes that off-set costs after graduation (Clark et al., 2015). Consequently, it is usually the most advantaged students who 'benefit from the intrinsic and positional benefits of going to a 'good' university' and 'the status of a university [is] increasingly defined by the profile of its student intake' (Leathwood, 2004, p. 38). In its promotion of meritocratic principles, HE fails to account for notions of risk and power relations (Leathwood, 2004; Morley, 1997; Reay, 2017). It paints a picture of applicants and participants who are unaffected by gender, race and social class (Morley, 1997), thus ignoring 'a wealth of evidence pointing to structural inequalities' (L. Archer, 2003, p. 8). From this perspective, to understand who participates in HE and where they go necessitates an approach that is attentive to deeper causal factors, one which takes into account the socio-cultural context of educational decision-making, as will be explored in the current study.

2.8.1 Oversimplified Inequality

The individualised model of learners as ‘rational actors’, within which the girls in the current study are making their decisions, assumes that ‘if the options are presented then all have an opportunity to choose between them and will do so to meet their best interests’ (Houghton et al., 2021, p. 42). As the most recent phase of the OfS-funded Uni Connect programme illustrates, young people are presumed to have capabilities to ‘unlock their potential’ and ‘make an informed choice about their options’ (OfS, 2021c). This alludes to the ‘openness’ and ‘kind of formal equality’ in HE choice making, that Ball, Davies, David, and Reay (2002, p. 51) argue make the idea of ‘choice’ in relation to HE a ‘highly problematic concept’. In other words, it is still underpinned by ‘implicit assumptions of free will’ (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 31) that the current thesis seeks to deconstruct through its consideration of the socio-cultural dimensions within which prospective HE students are planning for their futures. The longer-term benefits of HE may well outweigh the short-term costs for working-class young people, however, like Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argued in reference to students’ choice of career, policy often pays little attention to the socio-cultural complexities of the actual decision making process.

In relation to this, Reay’s earlier work employs several vivid metaphors of social class as the ‘undead’, ‘monster’ and ‘zombie’ stalking the English education system (Reay, 2006). Like Bathmaker et al.’s (2016) description of an ‘elephant in the room’, this is a powerful way to unearth the ‘absent presence’ of social class in everyday practices, processes and interactions (Reay, 2006, p. 289). It is this absence that Devlin (2013) suggests makes it tempting to think that with enough ‘skill and will’ working-class young people will flourish academically. It follows then that failure to succeed in school or to study at high-tariff HEIs is the fault of the individual student. Yet seemingly in contrast to this, Reay’s (2018b) more recent work draws attention to a ‘new recognition’ of social class as a politicised issue that is focussed on raising working-class attainment and realising working-class aspirations. What is salient here is that it does so without offering the material and cultural resources needed to seriously challenge class-based injustices. As Reay, Davies, David, and Ball (2001) explain, applications to HE for all students are influenced by deeply rooted material and emotional constraints. They are ‘complicated and risky’ (Moogan, Baron, &

Harris, 1999, p. 225), generate feelings of discomfort and pain (Reay, 2021) and are based not only on what is available but also on perceptions of what is appropriate (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). As a result, oversimplification of class-based inequalities builds on the myth of meritocracy and highlights the magnetic attraction embedded in the rhetoric of social mobility, where conditions of possibility might just as easily become barriers to thriving for the girls in this study.

2.8.2 The Locus for Change

Described by Berlant (2010) as a context of 'cruel optimism' the conditions of possibility, described above, place the burden of change, and associated risks of failure, firmly and disproportionately on working-class students. Since participation in HE is often presented to working-class applicants as a way of achieving a positive and worthwhile 'change', they are positioned as 'other' to the norm of a middle-class applicant for whom entry to HE is already assumed (L. Archer & Leathwood, 2003). This not only lessens the sense of entitlement for individual working-class students in accessing HE, but also means that getting to a position where they can contemplate university education may involve a threat to their identity. As Bathmaker (2021) argues, unlike their middle-class peers, these applicants cannot take their class positions for granted. It is no surprise therefore that while all students experience some anxiety in going to university (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011), these feelings are heightened for those from working-class backgrounds (Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016). For some, this facilitates a practice of self-exclusion from university-level study through which social class divisions are reproduced (Ball et al., 2002; Loveday, 2015a; Reay, 2001a). This is not attributable to deficits in the working-class students themselves, but originates in the dominance of middle- and upper- class practices and perceptions in relation to HE that 'underlying meritocratic sentiments' make invisible (Reay, 2021). It sets the context for some of the challenges that the girls in the current research might be managing, albeit with different proposed outcomes to the majority of their peers in the literature.

Like Crawford et al.'s (2017) research suggests, it is no surprise that in the highly stratified HE system, there are clear patterns of 'class aversion' from high-tariff universities that are not seen by working-class applicants as places where they will 'fit-in' (Ball et al., 2002). Described as the 'missing state school pupils' who have the

grades to apply to high-tariff HEIs but choose to go elsewhere (Atherton, 2020; Montacute & Culliane, 2018), research shows that fitting in academically at university does not eclipse the sense of social 'unease' and 'exclusivity' that they anticipate experiencing within these selective HE environments (Reay, 2021, pp. 57-58). Furthermore, for the minority of working-class learners who do choose to apply to highly selective institutions, as the girls in the current study are proposing to do, engagement with the middle-class 'ideal of identity and social class change' (L. Archer & Leathwood, 2003) comes at a high economic, social and personal cost (L. Archer & Hutchings, 2000). For instance, even as they become more equal in relation to the grades and university places attained by their middle-class peers, this may be at the cost of those they love and care for becoming less equal in relation to them (Reay, 2018b). The small but growing body of work that explores the lived experiences of working-class students at high-tariff and elite universities thus describes how these students occupy 'contradictory in-between class positions' (Bathmaker, 2021) and adopt 'hybrid identities' (Crozier, Reay, & Clayton, 2019) to manage social conditions that do not 'sit easily with authenticity' (Reay, 2001a). Therefore, although working-class students who decide to engage with HE may recognise the potential employment and economic benefits that are well-cited in the government's WP agenda, there is evidence to show how this is balanced with an obligation to hold onto a sense of 'self' that is deeply rooted in their social background.

Nevertheless, it is also argued within the literature that since high-tariff HEIs demand high grades, working-class applicants to these universities are likely to have a history of academic achievement in school that has already come with significant risk and cost to their social identities. Consequently, like Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2009, p. 1115) 'strangers in paradise', it may be that in applying to 'academic' and high-tariff universities, they see an opportunity to 'fit in as learners despite their class differences'. Indeed, as Crozier et al.'s (2019, p. 934) more recent analysis demonstrates, the high-achieving, working-class students in their study challenged the 'middle-class hegemony' of the universities they were attending and showed a determination to succeed that did not involve 'capitulating to the dominant norm'. These are significant findings within this emerging literature that are starting to challenge earlier research contributions about working-class students' perceptions of

HE as undesirable or 'not for the likes of us' (Reay et al., 2001), as well as questioning the focus on entrance to university as upward mobility (Granfield, 1991; Reay et al., 2009) or part of a project in becoming middle class (Lehmann, 2009, 2014). These new approaches to social class avoid conflating the value of HE with social mobility (Loveday, 2015b) and acknowledge how young people may frame entry to HE around a 'broader understanding of [its] social goods' (Clegg, 2011, p. 103).

In relation to this, some scholars have started to argue that the locus for change that has traditionally fallen on working-class students, needs to be turned onto the middle and upper classes in order to transform students' lived experiences of university on a wider systemic level (Reay, 2021). Similarly, they highlight the need for schools and HEIs to work in closer partnership to make changes that ensure learners from all social backgrounds seriously consider HE rather than leaving the burden to fall on individuals (O'Sullivan, Robson, & Winters, 2019). With regard to these developments, the thesis enters a 'challenging terrain' in relation to the concept of social mobility (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p. 16). It is not the intention of this thesis to show how working-class students use HE to 'escape' their backgrounds or transform into more acceptable middle-class versions of themselves. Therefore, their high-grades and proposed engagement with high-tariff universities are not considered to be a means to an end but are positioned in the thesis as part of learners' personal and academic 'projects' (Clegg, 2011), rather than their social mobility. To this end, it focuses on their desires and motivations to engage with HE, as they respond to factors relating to their social class and gender, as much as the functional activities and tasks that they perform in order to get there. Since previous studies are largely concentrated on students' lived experiences whilst at high-tariff universities, using personal projects to understand the proposed transition to these institutions among high-achieving, working-class girls who have not yet been helps to address a 'key current knowledge gap' (Clark et al., 2015).

2.9 Perspectives on University ‘Choice’ Making

2.9.1 Capital and Habitus

The theoretical framework for the current research is explained in the following chapter (Chapter 3), but it is important here to offer an overview of how theory has been adopted and operates within the existing literature in the field. This provides a useful account of different conceptions of university ‘choice’ making and helps to further justify the approach adopted in this thesis. Specifically, it highlights the gap the thesis addresses in exploring the role of agency among working-class students who might not otherwise be expected to apply to high-tariff universities. This starts by considering how previous researchers have relied heavily on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986) theories of cultural and social reproduction to understand how social class works in relation to young people’s educational decision making. They largely adopt the concept of ‘capital’ to explain how ‘material, social and cultural’ resources contribute to classed differences in students’ educational trajectories (Donnelly & Evans, 2016). This includes the way that material constraints may place geographical and financial boundaries around conceivable HE choices for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and result in what Reay et al. (2001) describe as working-class ‘localism’. For example, even prior to the rise in tuition fees and removal of maintenance grants, 78% of students living with parents in Merseyside cited financial reasons for doing so (Patinotis & Holdsworth, 2005, p. 88).

While this is an important way in which social class contributes to educational inequalities, the more dominant Bourdieusian explanations for the differences in educational outcomes and opportunities focus attention on how class operates symbolically and culturally (Bathmaker, 2021; Donnelly & Evans, 2016; A. Fuller, Paton, Foskett, & Maringe, 2008). They show how the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from families or through the schools they attend contribute to students’ HE decision making (O’Sullivan et al., 2019; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016; Reay et al., 2005). This is illustrated in the way that parents in middle class families may engage in a process of ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2011) of cultural capitals for their children that give them a ‘competitive advantage’ in the HE market (Brown, 2013) compared to their working-class counterparts who, having not participated in HE themselves, are unfamiliar with its workings or the potential

benefits of accessing it (Bailey, 2021). With limited access to forms of cultural capital that are valued by the dominant middle-classes in education, these studies suggest that students from working-class backgrounds are less likely to enter HE and be pushed to attend high-tariff universities (Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016). However, there is a notable absence within them of working-class students' educational success compared to the focus on their 'failure'.

Linked to the concept of capital is Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus', which has sufficient 'conceptual looseness' (Reay, 2004) to have been widely used and adapted within the literature on students' university decision making. While 'institutional habitus' has been used to understand the role of schools and universities in the reproduction of inequalities (Reay et al., 2009; Tarabini, Curran, & Fontdevila, 2017), habitus is used primarily to emphasise how psychological constraints operate as social class 'in the head' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 52) and inform students' subjective perceptions of what is possible and plausible for 'people like us' (Reay et al., 2009). For middle-class families, this means that implicit assumptions about university being the 'ultimate destination' of education make HE choices 'invisible' (Pugsley, 1998). As Ball et al. (2002, p. 58) describe, through the powerful silence that surrounds it, university is a 'non-decision' and takes on 'an obviousness that is difficult to evade'. In contrast, it is also used to understand why the decision to apply is not an 'obvious one' for working-class students, but is arrived at by thinking through reasons and justifying decisions (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p. 62). University decisions are therefore described as inherently risky for these students as they involve confronting uncertainties about 'who they might become and what they must give up' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 69). Habitus thus contributes to the argument that young people do make choices, but from limited options.

Perhaps more relevant to the current study is how Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been developed in more recent research to show how students can make the decision to apply to university outside of the 'norm' of their social class. They challenge earlier applications of his work as a straightforward theory of social reproduction by affording greater adaptability, fluidity and accommodativeness to the concept of habitus. For example, Ingram (2011) uses the notion of a 'destabilised habitus' to highlight the internal conflict experienced by high-achieving, working-class

boys as they seek to reconcile their identity and educational success. For many students, this is shown to engender 'heavy psychic costs' (Reay, 2017). Yet Crozier et al.'s (2019) work shows the development of 'hybrid identities' among working-class students at elite universities, whose 'generative' habitus shows greater versatility to engage with the 'in-between' spaces of academic success and class. This challenges dominant norms and assumptions about social difference whilst still rejecting the notion common to educational policy of a disembodied rational actor who can achieve social mobility through education and employment (Houghton et al., 2021). Like the current research, the literature recognises that choice is much more than just a matching of qualifications and attainment to opportunities (Ball et al., 2002, p. 54). Yet the notion of a habitus that 'tugs' (Ingram, 2011) or pulls the individual in different directions, arguably still ignores the amount of agency that working-class students bring to the decision making process when they apply to high-tariff HEIs (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). As is addressed in the following chapter, the extensive use of Bourdieu's concepts within this literature often means that there is limited examination in educational research of the full role that agency plays.

2.9.2 Rational Choice Theory

Outside of a Bourdieusian frame of reference, rational choice theory is another approach that has sometimes been used within the literature to highlight how social, cultural and material contexts inform students' university decision making. While parallels are sometimes drawn with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural reproduction, Boudon's (1974) focus on the 'primary' and 'secondary' effects of social stratification differentiate between inequalities in performance and choice (Thompson, 2019). The body of work in this area thus highlights reasons for the persistence of class differences in educational outcomes even after controlling for prior attainment (Nash, 2006). It also shows how the pathways through education and into HE may be more costly or risky for students from working-class backgrounds compared to their middle-class peers (M. Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Yaish, 2007; Thompson & Simmons, 2013). For example, with the characterisation of HE in WP policy as a 'private good' through which fees and the competitive, stratified system are justified, working-class students who are unsure of the outcomes associated with degree-level study are more likely to be risk adverse (Clark et al., 2015). This is likely to mean

that even when accounting for prior levels of attainment, they opt for 'safer' vocational routes into or through HE (Clark et al., 2015) and pursue courses with 'predictable economic rewards' (S. Evans, 2009). Therefore, while it might be argued that these students should 'rationally' want to 'maximise university status' by attending high-tariff universities, the over-representation of working-class students entering lower ranking institutions again highlights the bounded choices most are making (Harrison, 2016).

However, since education operates as a positional rather than an intrinsic good within this approach, the literature in this area struggles to account for the beliefs and desires of individuals themselves (Sullivan, 2006). It is important therefore to recognise the role of non-rational aspects of choice, rather than limit understanding of how an individual's actions can also be informed by what they care about most. Hodkinson and Sparke's (1997) recognition that decisions are only partially rational and are made only when people feel ready to do so, goes some way towards this. Of interest to the current research, is their assertion that the future progression of a young person is not always knowable or known. Through their well-cited notion of 'pragmatically rational decision making' they argue that new information is constantly absorbed into what is possible and desirable. This means that 'horizons for action', the arena within which decisions are made and actions are taken, can be refined and modified (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). The model is useful for understanding not only how social class structures young people's dispositions, but also how they can be reframed. Yet it still leaves a gap in understanding the sorts of resources that young people bring to these situations. As a result, it arguably relies on concepts of 'contingency' to explain why young people, like the girls in the thesis, may not follow the dominant pattern or trend in their decision making (Cieslik, 2006).

Nevertheless, what the majority of the literature highlighting students' social, cultural and material contexts has in common with the thesis, is its recognition that application to university is not a single, open choice that has predictable results for young people. The notion of 'choice' over-simplifies a complex and 'extensive problem solving process' (Moogan et al., 1999) and suggests an 'openness in relation to the psychology of preference' which is not open to all (Ball et al., 2002, p. 52). Decision making, in contrast, is used to capture the issues of both power and

constraint in students' educational trajectories and is adopted moving forward as a more appropriate term for the purpose of this thesis.

2.10 The Gender Dimension

In addition to examining the role of social class in relation to working-class students' notable HE decision making, the thesis also highlights students' experiences of being female. It is widely recognised that girls are more likely than boys to progress to university-level study at the end of college or sixth form. In 2019, the year in which many of the young women in this study were expecting to make the transition, 39.5% of females compared to 29% of males entered HE at the age of 18 (UCAS, 2020b). The gap between them narrowed slightly (0.2%) for the first time since 2013, but has remained relatively stable whilst rates of entry for both genders have been increasing overall (UCAS, 2020b). Explanations for this gap are often associated with differences in pupils' prior attainment in school. For instance, Crawford and Greaves (2015) found that boys' lower attainment at GCSE-level (aged 16) plays a key role in explaining the difference in their HE participation rates. Other research indicates that there is also a notable difference between teenagers' aspirations of going to university even prior to their GCSEs, which is higher for girls than boys (Berrington, Roberts, & Tammes, 2016) across all ethnicities (Platt & Parsons, 2018). Rates of aspiration are higher than corresponding participation rates across both genders, which importantly suggests that focussing on aspirations alone will not reduce differences in HE participation. Yet overall, this context means that there is a strong, gendered dimension in relation to concerns around HE participation that tends to be focussed on boys.

Consequently, over the past two decades feminist scholars such as Skelton and Francis (2005) have repeatedly argued that girls' educational trajectories are seen as 'peripheral' compared to those of boys. In what they describe as the political and media 'panic' around redressing boys' low attainment and low rates of participation, the gendered nature of girls' educational engagement is forgotten (L. Archer et al., 2010; Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2010). Shifting gender norms over the last fifty years, have meant that girls' educational and occupational aspirations have broadened considerably since Sharpe (1976) and Gaskell (1992) wrote about the conventional roles of women who work only until they are married. However, there is

still substantial evidence of gendered preferences in type of course or career with girls more likely to opt for ‘caring’ or ‘creative’ professions (Skelton & Francis, 2005) with a focus on helping others (S. Evans, 2009). Mirroring this, participation in STEM subjects in school and university remains clearly patterned by gender with a notable over-representation of boys in this area (Cavaglia, Machin, McNally, & Ruiz-Valenzuela, 2021; DeWitt & Archer, 2015; Smith, 2011). Indeed, there is recent evidence to show that girls’ underrepresentation in STEM subjects is particularly stark at high status universities, due in part to the qualifications they take earlier in their trajectories (Ro, Fernandez, & Alcott, 2021). It is suggested within the literature that these trends reflect the dominant alignment of science with masculinity (L. Archer et al., 2019) and positioning of the ‘arts’ as a feminine realm embedded with emotion and subjectivity (Skelton & Francis, 2005). This is arguably bound up with constructions of status and power that reside in the masculine and subtly blame the ‘feminisation’ of education, and by default girls, for boys’ underachievement.

2.11 The Interaction of Social Class and Gender

Feminist researchers therefore argue that that girls are present in educational debate only where to complain that boys have been disadvantaged, and are otherwise seen as ‘managing very well on their own’ (Francis, 2010, p. 23). However, UCAS (2020b) figures clearly show that not all girls are ‘easily’ accessing HE. In particular, the least advantaged quintile of girls according to the IMD (Table 1) and those living in low participation areas according to the POLAR index (Table 2), with both groups less likely to enter university than their more advantaged male and female peers.

Table 1: 18-Year-Old Entry Rate 2019 by IMD Quintile and Gender		
IMD 2015 Quintile	Girls	Boys
Quintile 1	31%	21%
Quintile 5	51%	42%
	20 pp gap	21 pp gap

Table 2: 18-Year-Old Entry Rate 2019 by POLAR4 Quintile and Gender		
POLAR4	Girls	Boys
Quintile 1	26%	16%
Quintile 5	52%	43%
	26 pp gap	27 pp gap

For these reasons, many scholars point out how gender differences in attainment and participation are not as great as the differences between social class (Berrington et al., 2016), which means that efforts to tackle boys' underrepresentation could be regarded as addressing the 'wrong problem' (Richardson et al., 2020). Framing the 'gender gap' in relation to social class, thus highlights how the educational trajectories of middle-class girls are not indicative of the experiences of all young women, despite the tendency for them to be represented as such (Skelton & Francis, 2009). As Skeggs (1997, p. 2) writes, 'the category 'woman' is always produced through processes which include class and classifying produces very real effects which are lived on a daily basis'. The thesis therefore contributes to the body of work that has emerged as a counterwave to the 'successful girls' discourse and argues that this is a middle-class story that fails to take the interaction of gender with socio-economic status into account (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020; Ringrose, 2007).

2.11.1 The Double-Bind of Being a Working-Class Girl

From this perspective, gender is not a stand-alone category. As intersectional feminist theorists explain, it is 'complex and intersected' (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020) and linked to other aspects of girls' identities. This means that the normative positioning of 'girl' through an emphasis on stereotypically feminine attributes like 'niceness' (Reay, 2001b) and 'emotionality' (Francis, Archer, Moote, de Witt, & Yeomans, 2017) has a particularly limiting effect for working-class young women. For all girls, these are passive behaviours that may result in students drawing attention away from themselves or not seeking help in class, but for working-class girls the consequences of having their needs overlooked in school is not something that can easily be compensated for at home (Fisher, 2019). Relative to their middle-class female peers, managing achievement through the double-bind of social class and gender is particularly problematic for working-class girls. However, equally

problematic is balancing what 'counts' as attractive and fashionable with academic success (Francis et al., 2010). Reformulating Bourdieu's theoretical framework in relation to gender, the construction of 'desirable female identity' is presented as a means of generating capital for peer status and approval for working-class girls (Wong, 2012). This includes manifestations of hetero-sexuality, such as the 'glamour' of outward appearance (L. Archer et al., 2010; Skeggs, 1997) and 'boyfriends' (L. Archer, Halsall, & Hollingworth, 2007a). However, these are not forms of capital that are easily transferable to the educational context. As Francis et al. (2017) point out, the 'hyper' femininity that they evoke constructs working-class girls' lives as 'vacuous', 'vain' and 'easily led'. This reinforces their position as 'other' to the middle-class 'ideal (female) pupil' (L. Archer et al., 2007a) and has a doubly exclusionary effect that endangers their educational engagement (Wong, 2012).

Although this does not appear to have constrained the educational attainment and proposed HE engagement of the working-class girls at the centre of the current study, as Raby and Pomerantz (2015) assert there are still significant hazards related to being seen by peers as 'overly academic' in school. With much of the literature focussed on an understanding of gender as 'performative' (Francis et al., 2010), managing the practices of 'doing girl' alongside the production of academic achievement is described as a 'precarious balancing act' (Renold & Allan, 2006, p. 469). For some girls, this leads to troubling patterns of 'dumbing down' their smartness to present perceptions of modesty (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015), which may result in their efforts being ignored or devalued by teachers (Skelton, Francis, & Read, 2010). For others, it means 'ditching' normative femininities in favour of confident assertions of cleverness that are intended to secure a 'better future' for themselves but are critically interpreted by teachers and peers (Renold & Allan, 2006). The complexities of 'doing girl' and 'doing clever' are also shown to trouble girls' experiences of studying certain subjects and may mean that high-achieving girls do not pursue 'lucrative and prestigious' courses and careers in STEM (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020, p. 985). Indeed, as a symbolically masculine field, excluding of the feminine, recent research shows how it is often avoided by girls, especially those from working-class backgrounds (Dawson et al., 2020), who are expected to invest strongly in a feminine production of themselves (Francis et al.,

2017). The femininity required to be a 'socially successful girl' is therefore often in tension with academic success (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015).

2.12 Post-Feminism and the 'Super Girl'

Nevertheless, smart girls, like the high-achieving young women in this study, are regularly presented as powerful evidence that girls are unimpeded by structural constraints and gendered expectations. Regardless of their circumstances, they make 'being smart appear attainable without struggle' (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p. 550). This mirrors a growing assumption that 'feminism has done its work' and that 'girls today can do, be, and have anything they want without fear of sexism or other inequalities' (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 13). In response to this 'promise of freedom and independence', there is an expectation for young women to live up to the liberties afforded to them (McRobbie, 2009). This is demonstrated, for example, in the tentative and embarrassed ways that the young female graduates in Fuller's (2018) study talk about their roles in caring for current and future children. There is an implicit sense of judgement in their accounts that is reflective of the 'lower status' afforded to aspirations that do not confirm with the 'supergirl' stereotype (Renold & Allan, 2006). It is thus argued that, alongside neoliberalism, these post-feminist views offer young women the "freedom to be' via education without offering 'freedom from' gendered norms and expectations' (C. Fuller, 2018, p. 103).

This is particularly true for the slowly rising number of women and girls from the least privileged backgrounds who are entering HE (UCAS, 2021a). Despite the neoliberal emphasis on individual success and gain, their decisions are often found to be structured around a desire to improve existing family circumstances and maintain existing family relationships (S. Evans, 2010; Reay, 2003). Yet because the planned continuity of this care during their studies is rarely accounted for in the existing university system, their altruistic approach to HE can 'define the horizons' of their geographical mobility and qualifications they obtain (S. Evans, 2009, p. 341). This means that even when they decide to engage with university-level study, working-class girls' decisions are structured by classed and gendered norms and expectations that allow them 'to take advantage of the benefits it can offer but not as owners of it' (L. Archer & Hutchings, 2000, p. 570). This demonstrates a clear contradiction between 'liberal feminist girl power ideals' and the continued

expectations for young women to balance this with traditional gendered roles (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 37). Yet in a context of 'increased competition and compulsory perfectionism' young women are still expected to strive for individual success (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020, p. 985). As previous research shows, this takes a toll on high-achieving girls who experience 'anxiety, separation and rejection' that operates simultaneously alongside 'pride' in their educational accomplishments (Skelton et al., 2010, p. 189).

Like Pomerantz and Raby (2011, p. 562) assert, the existing research around high-achieving young women thus shows that 'while academic success is a potential avenue to economic and social freedom for girls, it also seems to come at a price'. What is less commonly explored in this field is how that price might be higher for some groups of girls than others. The discussions above are certainly suggestive that the high achievement and proposed engagement with high-tariff universities from the girls in the current study might not be an entirely 'trouble-free' success (Harris, 2017). However, the specific educational experiences of young women from working-class backgrounds who are attaining high grades and gaining places at high-tariff HEIs are not currently well understood. Despite post-feminist arguments, it is likely that these girls' experiences of academic success will be classed, gendered, intersected, and complicated.

2.13 Summarising Points

Having explored the literature relating to working-class girls' educational decision making and HE participation, this chapter concludes by explaining how they broadly align with two major lines of thinking. The first suggests that young women are largely in control of their own educational outcomes. This has a presence in the current WP agenda, which is framed within a discourse of equality, opportunity and choice alongside the presumption that young people have the capabilities to 'unlock their potential' (OfS, 2021c). From this perspective, attending university is regarded as a personal 'investment' supported by its positioning as a 'private good' and justified by the supposed rewards of having a degree in a competitive labour market (Allen & Ainley, 2013; Clark et al., 2015). By arguing that all young people have the opportunity to prove themselves on the basis of hard work and talent, this viewpoint has a salient link to notions of the post-feminist 'super girl' who can 'do, be and have'

anything that they choose (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 13). Overall, it presents an expectation for high-achieving, working-class girls, like those in the current research, to live up to the liberties afforded to them.

The second line of thinking presented through the literature in this chapter is that young people's educational 'choice' making is determined by the structures and cultures of social class and gender and the intersection of these factors. This includes a prevalent focus on habitus and associated material, social and cultural capitals (Ingram, 2011; Reay et al., 2009), and sometimes the primary and secondary effects of social stratification (M. Jackson et al., 2007; Thompson & Simmons, 2013). Studies adopting this line of thinking describe how these can place boundaries on conceivable choices or make them too risky for students with certain social characteristics, such as being female and/or working class. From this perspective, there is a clear social and structural explanation for typical patterns of educational attainment or engagement among particular social groups and for why individuals may find stepping outside of the 'norm' of their social group especially challenging. It positions the working-class girls in this study as 'other' to the middle-class female 'ideal' (L. Archer et al., 2007a).

While both lines of thinking contribute to understanding the contexts in which young people are making their educational decisions, they are also problematic for the current thesis. In the first, it is difficult to reconcile individualised arguments around HE participation with strong patterns of association between attainment or entry to university and social class. The enduring gaps between the most and least advantaged students in whether and where they engage with HE suggest that students do not have the equal opportunities to prove themselves that are implied in the rhetoric of choice or the OfS's ambitious WP targets. Furthermore, although the high-achieving, working-class young women in the current study model notions of individual success and gain, the idea of a disembodied rational actor risks ignoring the social, cultural and material contexts that they have navigated to get to the point of application to high-tariff HEIs. In contrast, however, the second viewpoint does not allow enough room for these notable pathways into HE. Instead, with a strong focus on the constraints and challenges faced by working-class young people in education, it struggles to explain how those who should not succeed still do so. While there are

a small number of studies that do attempt this explanation, for example through notions of a 'generative' (Crozier et al., 2019) or 'destabilised' (Ingram, 2011) habitus, it is argued in the thesis that they do not account for the full role that agency plays.

To explain the educational decisions being made by the high-achieving, working-class girls in the current study thus requires a more nuanced way of thinking about the dualism of structure and agency. This means accounting for the intentional action of the young women as they attain high grades and start applications to high-tariff universities, whilst also still acknowledging the importance of social class and gender in their lives. The theoretical framework for doing so is presented in the following chapter.

2.14 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter began by setting out a short history of social class to illustrate the changing and complex landscape within which the current study is situated. It has shown how the notion of being 'working-class' has been captured in academic literature and public discourse, sometimes through more fragmented terms, and how it plays a salient role as a signifier of positionality. As this chapter demonstrates, there already exists an extensive range of research that focuses on social inequalities relating to class in the context of education. This predominantly explores the educational 'failure' of working-class children in school and their outperformance by middle-class peers. There are fewer studies that focus on the educational success of working-class young people and, where they exist, they are largely concentrated on university participation rather than how students' earlier experiences are leading them towards the point of transition. With prior attainment acting as such a strong indicator of progression to HE there is thus a need for research, like the current thesis, that takes a broader look at high-achieving, young people's educational trajectories. The strategies the current research employs for doing so are explained in Chapter 4. As discussed earlier, entrance into HE is not a 'means to an end', and this is reflected in the focus of the thesis on working-class, girls' personal and academic 'projects' rather than their social mobility.

The notability of the girls' trajectories and proposed engagement with high-tariff universities has been highlighted in this chapter through current patterns of participation. These are contextualised within the wider context of increased participation, the WP agenda and shifting university contexts in the UK HE system, which suggest that all young people should have equal opportunities to prove themselves. In relation to this, the chapter highlights what Reay (2017) describes as the 'myth' of meritocracy, where privilege is misrecognised for talent and ability. This is shown to have a damaging impact on working-class students when they reach university, however, there is little research about how these contradictory conditions operate for working-class young people prior to getting there. This is thus an important area for consideration in the present study.

Combined with the particular complexities of being female as well as working-class, the current research explains how the girls in this study are managing their educational engagement and proposed transitions. Pertinent to this is how the existing literature has shown that there are significant hazards related to being high-achieving and being a girl in school, which are exacerbated by the post-feminist promise of freedom and success. This recognises the reality that high-achieving young women are not free from gendered norms and expectations, yet there is far less consideration of how they are impeded by structural constraints relating to their social class. The doubly exclusionary effect of being female and working-class is important to the thesis which considers the notable educational decisions being made by a group of high-achieving girls from working-class backgrounds who are proposing to engage with high-tariff universities.

In summary, the literature reviewed in this chapter makes apparent the originality of the current research. It highlights many reasons why working-class girls do not typically apply to high-tariff universities and, aside from individualised ideology, fewer for why they do. The contexts in which they are undertaking their education make their high-achievement and proposed university engagement notable among their peers. This necessitates a more nuanced approach to understanding their decision making than existing research provides. The theoretical framework through which this is achieved within the current thesis is explained in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

A Theoretical Framework for Change: Reflexivity and the Interaction of Structure and Agency

3.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the work of Margaret Archer to outline the theoretical framework employed in the thesis (1995, 2003, 2007a, 2010a, 2012). It brings to the forefront her separation of structure and agency and their interaction through reflexivity as a novel way to explain variations in working-class girls' educational trajectories, rather than relying on generalisations about their probable courses of action. Employing reflexivity as a key concept to understand their educational decision making, the chapter makes the case for how individuals both shape society and are shaped by it in Archer's morphogenetic approach. It therefore begins by explaining its departure from more 'popular' accounts of the relationship between structure and agency (M. S. Archer, 2016, p. 152), which rely on their co-constitution and where the possibility of reflexivity is 'theoretically disposed of' (M. S. Archer, 2010b, p. 12). Instead, informed by Archer's endorsement of analytical dualism, the chapter conceptualises structure and agency as distinct strata of reality and explains how their interaction over time may lead to transformation and change in society, as much as to reproduction. Set within her morphogenetic approach and the shifting contours of society, the chapter therefore defends the interaction of structure and agency in the form of reflexivity that 'not only can be but is, radically heterogenous' (M. S. Archer, 2010b, pp. 10, 11). It is this interplay between 'social conditioning and agential responses' that allows the thesis to account for 'inter-personal' variations in working-class girls' educational decision making rather than relying on explanations of inter-group regularities (M. S. Archer, 2010b, p. 12).

3.2 (Non-)Conflationary Theorising

To explain the reflexive decision making of the specific group of girls in this study, the theoretical framework is developed through Margaret Archer's response to other accounts that fail to resolve the 'problem' of structure and agency in ways that retain each entity's 'qualitatively different characteristics' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 12). In

particular, her theorising offers a more suitable alternative to the use of Pierre Bourdieu, which is shown in the literature review (Chapter 2) to be prominent in similar areas of study. One of Archer's main contentions with Bourdieu's set of 'thinking tools' (Wacquant, 1989, p. 50) is that neither 'social structures' nor 'acting people' can make autonomous contributions to social outcomes (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 178). Instead, they are united in the 'double and obscure relation' that exists between habitus and field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). In this way, Bourdieu describes how 'the field structures the habitus' and 'habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world' (p. 127). Through this interdependent relationship, actors 'apprehend their specific situation [...] typically without reflection' and undertake a course of action that 'is "appropriate" to it' (Weininger, 2005, p. 132). This means, however, that they react to novel situations habitually rather than with the reflexive capacity to adapt and respond to them that is presented in Archer's alternative framework. In this way, according to Bourdieu (1992, p. 125), change only takes place in so far as it 'makes sense' according to the 'necessities and probabilities' inscribed in the field, rather than for personal reasons that can be articulated.

Bourdieu's work is therefore an example of what Archer (2000, p. 4) rebukes as 'conflationary theorising'. Unlike reductionism, or what Archer (2000, p. 5) calls 'upwards' or 'downwards' conflation, Bourdieu does not uphold one element of social reality as its '*ultimate constituent*' while rendering the other inert. Instead, by insisting on their inseparability, he offers an 'areductionist' account where both are mutually constitutive of one another. Though this 'central conflation' of structure and agency, Archer (2007a, p. 42) argues that Bourdieu 'deprives human subjectivity of the necessary degree of independence from its habitat to reflect upon it (evaluate it, find it wanting, determine to change it and so forth)'. This means that what individuals think or plan never originates from within themselves because they are inextricably entangled in the external conditions of their formation (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 44). Therefore, as Archer (2000, p. 6) asserts, in Bourdieu's work there can be no analysis of the interplay between objectivism and subjectivism or between structure and agency, which 'severely limits their utility in practical social research'. In the context of this study, it would make it particularly challenging to fully account for the ways in which working-class girls make educational decisions that do not mirror 'the

objective probabilities' inscribed in their social positioning (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 47).

This limitation is not dissimilar from other conflationary accounts. In introducing Archer's resolution to the 'inseparability' of structure and agency (2012), it is useful to acknowledge that central conflation is a charge she also levies on Giddens and his account of 'structuration' (1984). Like Bourdieu, Giddens recognises the importance of both structure and agency but is accused by Archer of amalgamating the two sides as different aspects of human individuals. In this way, he posits that structure 'has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity' (Giddens, 1984, p. 26). Agents are thus embedded in, and limited by, current activities, rather than being able to transform the structural and cultural contexts they have inherited. In other words, the things that cause effects become part of the things they have affected (Elder-Vass, 2010). Structuration is therefore rebuked by Archer (2010c, p. 227) as 'ever a process and never a product'. As with Bourdieu's conflationary model, it leaves little analytical space to distinguish between structure and agency (Clegg, 2010) and is based on overcoming dichotomies that Archer's morphogenetic approach retains and utilises to explain both how individuals shape society and how they are shaped by it. In this way, the thesis is underpinned by a framework that brings together structure and agency as two separate entities and teases out the interplay between them.

3.3 Analytical Dualism

As an anti-reductionist and non-conflationary account (M. S. Archer, 2000), the application of Archer's model of morphogenesis in this thesis stands in contradistinction to theories, like those of Giddens and Bourdieu, that conflate structure and agency as 'the two faces of a single coin' (M. S. Archer, 2016, p. 152). Instead, it relies on the 'linking' rather than 'sinking' of one element into the other in order to examine the effects that they have on each other. Important to this study, is how the process of morphogenesis captures the consequences of this interaction in the form of change, as much as reproduction. Using 'morpho' to indicate that society has no pre-set shape and 'genesis' that its shaping is the product of social relations, it describes how 'the process of social structuring' can lead to transformation (M. S. Archer, 1995, pp. 5, 166). To this end, morphogenesis offers 'explanatory leverage'

for the ways in which structures impinge upon agents, and also for how their subjective reception by agents means that people do not respond uniformly when confronted with similar objective circumstances (M. S. Archer, 1995, p. 65). The role of what M. S. Archer (1995) calls 'analytical dualism' is intrinsic to explaining this process and necessitates both the analytical separability of structure and agency as well as their temporal distinction.

Firstly, it is the analytical separability of structure and agency that is the starting point for explaining the potentially transformative actions of agents. Drawing on the critical realist proposition of a 'stratified ontology' (Sayer, 2010a), structure and agency are regarded as two separate phenomenon with 'quite different properties and powers' (M. S. Archer, 2003). Each is irreducible to the other, has relative autonomy and is relatively enduring (M. S. Archer, 1995). Nevertheless, 'the one is essential for how the other will be moulded' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 181). It is crucial, therefore, to articulate their interplay and understand how they casually interrelate in order to explain the intended and unintended consequences that this produces. Indeed, unless the analytical distinction between structure and agency is maintained, explanations of their relative influence upon one another 'will lapse' (Porpora, 2016, p. viii) and preclude a full explanation of social outcomes. Archer therefore describes her morphogenetic approach as being 'against transcendence' and 'for emergence' (M. S. Archer, 2003, 2016), grounded in the analytical separability and causal interaction of these two entities.

This description of morphogenesis is further supported by the second premise of analytical dualism, which places Archer's model of structure and agency into a time dimension (Danermark et al., 2002). As Archer argues, structures and agents are temporally distinguishable, as well as being analytically separable and 'without the proper incorporation of time the problem of structure and agency can never be satisfactorily resolved' (1995, p. 65). When structure and agency can diverge from each other in time, it becomes 'justifiable and feasible to talk of pre-existence and posteriority when dealing with specific instances of the two' (M. S. Archer, 1995, p. 66). In this way, morphogenesis reveals how the properties and powers of structure have 'temporal priority' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 2) and precede the actions of agents. Agents are born into a set of structures that are not of their making but are a

prerequisite for human action since they lay down the objective conditions in which this takes place. However, the reproduction or transformation of structure is only a result of the actions of agents as they interact with the structures around them.

Therefore, the exercise of agential powers has temporal priority to the *reproduction* of structure, which Archer (2003) also calls 'structural elaboration'. In their elaborated form, structures then provide the conditions for subsequent agential action or interaction, as the morphogenetic cycle starts again. Analytical separability and temporal distinction are thus needed in conjunction not only to examine the interplay of structure and agency over time but also to explain changes in structures and agents over time (M. S. Archer, 1995). Through the procedure of analytical dualism, they distinguish both the 'original and resulting circumstances' from the agential 'doing' and 'making' that takes place in between (Porpora, 2016, p. viii). This is a valuable contribution to understanding how individuals shape society and, equally, how they are also shaped by it in a morphogenetic approach. Within the current thesis, it allows for thinking 'otherwise' (M. S. Archer, 2007a) about the educational trajectories of working-class girls. Since their biographies are always being shaped rather than predetermined, Archer's framework is better equipped to account for instances of divergence, change and transformation over time and in a way that is not possible when the individual properties and powers of structures and agents or the importance of time are elided.

A final point that is worthy of note in this explanation of analytical dualism, is that use of the term 'structure' has been adopted here to broadly define both material and cultural properties. This does not make culture the 'poor relation' of structure (M. S. Archer, 2005), but is largely undertaken for ease of reading and explanation. What should not be overlooked is that Archer makes similar assumptions about culture's analytical separability and temporal distinction from agency, as she does for structure. Where culture is explicitly included later in the thesis, it can be defined in Archer's terms as 'all intelligibilia', that is 'doctrines, theories, beliefs and individual propositions' that have the ability to be understood by someone (M. S. Archer, 2020, p. 154). Like material properties, they are 'real and separable from knowing subjects' and thus independent of anyone's claim to know, believe or assent to them (M. S. Archer & Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 96). It is this distinction, rather than conflation,

between 'ideas' and 'the use of ideas' that affords culture as much of a causal role in society as structure. Any action that is taken to promote, change or conceal ideas thus relies on culture and agency existing as two separate entities that causally interrelate over time within Archer's morphogenetic approach. Like with structure and agency, this supports explanations of how particular ways of knowing or being are shaped, rather than predetermined. However, as the following sections take forward, it also relies on knowing more about how they are linked.

3.4 The 'Missing Link' between Structure and Agency

Although analytical dualism explains the importance of untangling the distinct properties and powers of structures and agents in order to affirm their interplay, 'this does not tell us anything about the mediatory process involved' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 2). Since it is the interaction between structure and agency that shapes outcomes, it is important to give more attention to it. As Archer (2003, p. 166) points out, it is this 'missing link' between these two very different entities that is needed to account fully for the process of morphogenesis. Capturing this firstly involves examining the concepts of 'constraints' and 'enablements', which are used by Archer to explain how structural powers impinge upon agents. Applied in this study to explain the limitations and opportunities encountered by a particular group of high-achieving, working-class girls in relation to their social class and gender, they mean that depending on how an individual is situated in society 'some courses of action would be impeded and others would be facilitated' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 4). However, importantly, these structural powers are never independent of their subjective reception. In other words, they do not possess an intrinsic capacity for constraint or enablement but require something to constrain or something to enable. As Archer (2003, p. 4) explains, it is 'only because people envisage particular courses of action can one speak of their constraint or enablement'. Without an agent's subjective formulation of personal projects or their 'aspirations and designs' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 54), nothing would activate the causal powers of structures to constrain or enable them.

Constraints and enablements thus entail not only objective structural causal powers but also subjective agential causal powers (M. S. Archer, 2003). Yet to fully explain the mediatory process between them, through which individuals respond subjectively to the constraining or enabling powers of their objective circumstances, Archer

(2003, p. 9) proposes that it is necessary to 'revindicate the influential nature of reflexivity'. This is the agential deliberation through which people consider their own concerns 'in light of their objective circumstances' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 5), and determine what to do 'in situations that were not of their making' (p. 324). It involves much more than the girls in this study simply entertaining an 'objective material or ideational interest' as they embark on courses of action that are leading them towards university study (M. S. Archer, 2003). Through the interplay of objectivity and subjectivity, people diagnose their situations, ascertain where their interests lie and plan for their futures. In other words, their courses of action depend on the 'missing link' between structure and agency, that is the 'personal emergent property' of reflexivity (M. S. Archer, 2003).

3.5 The Reflexive Imperative

Archer describes reflexivity as a predominantly mental activity that 'finds its home' in the 'internal conversation' which most people engage with silently and from a young age (M. S. Archer, 2007a, 2010b). This self-talk allows individuals to reflect on themselves in relation to their objective circumstances and vice versa. However, it is important to distinguish reflexivity from the process of reflection. While reflection is 'the action of a subject towards an object', reflexivity involves some 'thought upon the self' and takes the form of 'subject-object-subject' (M. S. Archer, 2010b). It is this crucial feature of 'the 'object' under consideration being bent back in a deliberative sense, upon the 'subject' doing the considering' that distinguishes full reflexivity from reflection (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 2; 2010b). For example, the question of 'what do I do next with this?' might become 'can I cope with this and do I really want to?' (2010b, p. 2). In this way, reflexive deliberation 'consists in people evaluating their situations in light of their concerns and evaluating their projects in the light of their circumstances' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 34). Reflexivity, therefore, can never be a completely individualised or isolated activity. It leads the agent to confront the objective circumstances in which they find themselves, rather than becoming an integral part of them. It can thus be examined as the 'causally powerful relationship between deliberation and action in people's social lives' (p. 37).

Integral to Archer's concept of reflexivity is her premise that it is increasingly replacing routine action to shape how people make their way through the world. This

takes place in response to the 'growing number of novel situations encountered in the social order' where routine action does not offer guidelines for appropriate action (M. S. Archer, 2010b, p. 136). Reflexivity is therefore held to be central to navigating the shifting contours of a 'global society' where change is continually being induced (M. S. Archer, 2007a). It is this point around 'modernity' and the advent of 'contextual incongruity' that she thus uses to defend her work from 'theoretical adjustments' (M. S. Archer, 2010a, p. 124) that seek a reconciliation between individual reflexivity and Bourdieu's concept of habitus (for example, Elder-Vass, 2007b; Fleetwood, 2008; Sayer, 2010b). These efforts to bridge the work of Archer and Bourdieu largely rest on the premise that there exists enough continuity for the formation of habitual routine action, alongside sufficient change for some reflexive deliberation. As Sayer (2009, p. 122) asserts 'habitus continues to loom large even in the midst of contextual discontinuity'. However, it is argued in this thesis that this impedes a full understanding of the complete reflexive powers that individuals use to manage the complexities of living in contemporary society. New and emerging educational, occupational and social contexts complicate the exact replication of previously existing social conditions. Therefore, according to Archer (2010a, p. 141) even the production of regularities and the continuance of a shared way of life become 'a matter of active choice'. Rather than being driven by structure or routine, she emphasises the deliberative and creative nature of the courses of action that individuals take to maintain their social positioning as much as they do to transform it. Reflexivity is not positioned as an option open to certain agents, it is a necessity for life in society (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 42).

3.6 Modes of Reflexivity

Since individuals are increasingly having to confront the contextual discontinuity between their background and foreground, Archer (2007a, 2010a) suggests that there has been an increase in the scope and range of reflexivity which individuals exercise. Crucially, she emphasises that this does not mean that individuals make their own history, or that people live in an unstructured society (M. S. Archer, 2007a). She recognises how 'individuals start from differentially advantageous places, with different life chances' (2007a, p. 54). However, in order to account for variability as well as regularity in courses of action of those who are similarly objectively situated,

she outlines how they adopt different 'stances' towards the constraints and enablements of society. These may be 'evasive', 'strategic' or 'subversive' stances, which each represent a subjective judgement that the agent attaches to their objective social context and its place in their life (M. S. Archer, 2003). This is key to explaining precisely what the girls in this thesis may individually make of their involuntary social placement, rather than relying on generalisations about their probable courses of action (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 121).

In relation to this, Archer describes how the process of reflexivity is 'radically heterogeneous' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 11). She outlines three different modes of reflexivity, which correspond to the stances that people adopt towards any given constraint or enablement and have 'effectively conjoined subjectivity to objectivity in three completely different ways' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 341). These modes of reflexivity are 'communicative', 'autonomous' and 'meta-reflexive' which respectively link to an evasive, strategic and subversive stance towards constraints and enablements. Importantly, she also associates each mode of reflexivity with a distinctive pattern of social mobility for its practitioners, which captures the continuity or discontinuity in an individual's social trajectory. Applied to this study, this is not about working-class students becoming, or failing to become, more 'middle class', as Chapter 2 warns against. Rather, the focus is on their personal projects and how, in pursuit of these, a person's biographical pathway may or may not be 'framed by social contexts different from those in which they started their lives' (Caetano, 2015a, p. 62). In this way, as individuals reflexively negotiate projects that are satisfying and sustainable, they may create conditions for transformation and change or may create conditions for social stasis.

Outlining the different modes of reflexivity, is thus important in explaining differences between people's social trajectories. Firstly, Archer (2003, 2007a) describes how 'communicative reflexives' endorse and 'anchor' themselves in the stable and continuous contexts into which they were born. In doing so, they adopt a stance of 'evasion' towards constraints or enablements, in order to commit to the inter-personal relations, family and friends, which are their ultimate concerns. While this leads to social reproduction or replication, communicative reflexives are by no means passive or semi-unconscious agents. They exercise their reflexivity through a

pattern of 'thought and talk' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 159) with 'similar and familiar' (M. S. Archer, 2010b, p. 140) with whom they share common points of reference. In doing so, they may actively shun objective enablers for social change in favour of contextual stability (M. S. Archer, 2003). Content with the priorities and projects that they have reflexively conceived within their existing horizons, they work for the maintenance of this setting rather than its transformation (M. S. Archer, 2003).

In contrast, those who exercise an autonomous mode of reflexivity, are likely to have experienced an initial social context that lacked stability. As a result, they are more likely to make self-reliant decisions based on their own judgement and on advice from resources outside of their closest social networks. In so doing, they adopt a strategic stance towards constraints and enablements. These autonomous reflexives are more likely to make decisions considered as 'innovative' or 'risky' in their social context (M. S. Archer, 2007a), but are attempting to 'climb society's 'ladders' and to circumvent its 'snakes' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 350). Consequently, Archer (2003, p. 348) associates autonomous reflexivity with a process of transformation and explains that it 'makes a crucial contribution to the dynamics of social mobility'. Lastly, like autonomous reflexives, for meta-reflexives too, there is no stable early social context. They also draw on their own autonomous resources as they commit to a course of action. However, meta-reflexives are value-orientated and so embrace ideals as their ultimate concern. In doing so, they seek to 'make a difference' to issues of social justice or to fulfilling an obligation to act in line with their values (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 131). This means that agents take a subversive stance towards constraints and enablements, and may be 'willing to embrace downward mobility and its objective losses in order to pursue their vocations' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 351).

3.7 Passive and Active Agents

In addition to these three reflexive modes, Archer also includes the notion of 'fractured' reflexivity. This relates to those whose powers of reflexivity have been 'suspended' and are no longer able to 'deal subjectively with the objective environment they confronted' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 298). With their focus on an immediate need for survival, day-to-day planning precludes reflexive deliberation about purposeful courses of action (M. S. Archer, 2012). This not only leads to difficulties in making decisions, but can also result in distress or disorientation for

fractured reflexives who are unable to manage the 'play of objective circumstances' upon themselves (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 299). It is for this reason that fractured reflexives are described by Archer as 'passive agents' who, unlike communicative, autonomous and meta- reflexives, are unable to take a 'stance' towards constraints and enablements that impinge on them. This does not mean that they cease to act, but that this may be no more purposeful than 'random action', which is undertaken without an instrumental internal conversation and deprived of interior control (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 301). While this is not a permanent condition, more a temporary loss of control in their lives for reasons beyond their control, these passive agents may struggle to find pathways that are satisfying and sustainable until their fractured reflexivity is 'mended' (M. S. Archer, 2003).

However, it should not be assumed that being an 'active' rather than 'passive' agent always leaves communicative, autonomous and meta- reflexives objectively 'better off' (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Taking a stance does not mean that active agents have a full understanding of the enablements and constraints that impinge on them, nor does it necessarily entail a 'correct' reading of the objective situations they find themselves in (M. S. Archer, 2003). Being an active agent involves miscalculations and making mistakes. Yet what distinguishes these individuals from passive agents is that they are subjectively seeking 'something that he or she values highly and is expressive of who he or she wishes to be' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 300). There is no guarantee that their intentional actions 'to advance or to protect' what they care about most will be successful (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 7). However, taking a stance towards constraints and enablements entails a certain degree of control for autonomous, communicative and meta- reflexives over their own lives as they evaluate and adjust their projects to those they think they can realise (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Otherwise, as for those experiencing fractured reflexivity, there can be no chance of success beyond that of random action.

3.8 Beyond Reflexive 'Types'

While Archer's modes of reflexivity are adopted as valuable tools for the analysis in this thesis, there are a small number of studies that urge caution in the way that these modes are understood (Baker, 2019; Bovill, 2012; Dyke, Johnston, & Fuller, 2012; Porpora & Shumar, 2010). These largely relate to how the use of the label

'reflexives' in Archer's writing tends to categorise people into 'types' according to a single reflexive mode that 'predominates' when they ultimately decide upon important matters (M. S. Archer, 2007a). This precludes a more 'dynamic' understanding of reflexivity where modes of reflexivity are not 'static' properties of individuals and may alter during their life course (Dyke et al., 2012). Elsewhere, for example, Archer's concepts are framed in a way that allows individuals to demonstrate a 'broader mix of patterns' (Porpora & Shumar, 2010, p. 217). So, depending on the social context, over their life course an individual may demonstrate different combinations of reflexive modes and engage in reflexivity as much as a communicative and meta-reflexive as they do as an autonomous reflexive. As Dyke et al. (2012) describe, they may thus develop a 'repertoire' of reflexive approaches to draw from.

Building on this departure from Archer's notion of reflexive types is a small body of research relating more specifically to education. Previous studies have used Archer's work on reflexivity to explain the strategies mature, work-based students use to navigate their HE studies (Bovill, 2012), and to theorise working-class women's 'sense making' of their HE experiences (Shields, 2021). What they have in common with the points above is that they reject Archer's tendency to concentrate on a dominant type of reflexivity in relation to each of her adult participants. This draws attention to the complexity of educational decision making, particularly among non-traditional students (Bovill, 2012), and refocuses the studies on the ways in which reflexivity can 'adapt as circumstances and situations change' (Dyke et al., 2012, p. 836). While they focus largely on adult learners and those already engaged in HE study, more closely aligned to the age range and point of transition of the students in the current study is Baker's (2019) examination of the role of structure and agency in FE students' decision making. In a similar way to the other authors, she highlights the value of departing from reflexive 'types' in favour of 'dual' or 'multiple' modes of reflexivity. This is used to provide greater insight into young people's different responses to constraints and enablements and how these may be framed by the circumstances they find themselves in.

The developing conceptualisations of reflexivity found elsewhere in the literature form a springboard for the present study to engage with new and valuable insights

into the process of reflexive deliberation. To this end, whilst still employing Archer's wider theoretical framework to conceptualise the interplay of structure and agency in working-class girls' educational decision making, the current study is open to exploring a more dynamic understanding of her modes of reflexivity in the chapters that follow. This has the potential to provide greater insight into the different ways that this particular group of working-class girls use the 'potentiality of active human agents' to manage the compelling role of social class and gender as it defines the constraints and enablements they face in pursuit of HE (Clegg, 2016, p. 502). As they act reflexively towards them in different aspects of their lives, the impact of constraints and enablements on their decision making and the complex ways they navigate their educational trajectories cannot be predetermined.

3.9 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has presented the theoretical framework employed in the thesis by drawing on Margaret Archer's critical realist approach to structure, agency and their interplay in the form of reflexivity. While other studies of students' educational trajectories and decision making have drawn extensively on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this chapter has outlined the case for departing from his conflationary theorising. In this way, rather than clamping structure and agency together in a 'conceptual vice' (M. S. Archer, 2010c, p. 231), the thesis uses Archer's morphogenetic approach to bring them together as two separate entities and tease out their interplay. This contributes to understanding how the educational trajectories of the girls in this study may be shaped and reshaped over time through their interactions with structural constraints and enablements relating to their social class and gender. Entwined with the empirical research undertaken for this thesis, morphogenesis also informs the current study's methodological positioning and is considered further in Chapter 4.

As the current chapter has outlined, fundamental to the possibility of morphogenesis is Archer's concept of reflexivity. Its heterogenous nature is central to explaining the educational decision making of the girls in this study as they pursue notably different educational pathways to their working-class counterparts. It shows how they individually determine what to make of the structural constraints and enablements that impinge on them and commit to courses of action that are leading to proposed

engagement with HE, without relying on generalisations about probable courses of action. Using the modes of reflexivity developed in Archer's work, but with an openness to a more dynamic understanding of their use in the following chapters, the thesis advances Archer's theorising around the relationship between deliberation and action in people's lives. In this way, it highlights the nuanced and considered ways in which the working-class girls in this study respond to factors relating to class and gender during their academic pursuits.

Chapter 4

Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the theoretical framework introduced in the previous chapter to explain how critical realism and Margaret Archer's concept of morphogenesis inform the way in which the research for this thesis was undertaken. Acting as an 'overall orientating lens' (Creswell, 2009), the initial philosophical discussions presented here clarify the ontological position of the research and provide the 'framework' for its methodology (M. S. Archer, 1995, p. 13). The chapter then clarifies how this informs the qualitative and biographical design of the research, which is intended to create understanding *with* those involved rather than 'revealing it' (Thomson, 2008). Its explanation of the use of participatory and creative methods is particularly important in a study that explores the internal, personal process of reflexivity. These methods have informed the way in which each student from the sample of sixteen females in Year 12 and Year 13 created a map of her life and educational experiences. The process of identifying and working with the students in the creation of the life-maps and how these were subsequently used to drive individual, face-to-face elicitation interviews is explored in this chapter. Finally, the chapter explains how prioritising the girls' biographical accounts, at a pace and via a means relevant to them, strengthens the validity of the research and supports its ethical values.

4.2 The Critical Realist 'Backcloth'

As a philosophical 'underlabourer' to the research in this thesis (Mutch, 2017), critical realism's central proposition is that what humans can know about the world captures only a small part of a deeper reality. Since reality exists with considerable autonomy, it does not always act according to expectations. Therefore, events that are unexpected, or do not follow predicted routines or patterns, such as the proposed progression of the working-class girls to high-tariff universities, may provide useful insights. Although these young women cannot make what they please of their circumstances (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 16), central to critical realism is the premise that these events do not happen by chance or without reason. Behind any event

there are 'intrinsic properties' or 'inherent mechanisms' that generate it (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 198). Since these 'causal powers' have the potential to produce, create or make something happen, they focus attention on the capabilities and possibilities of the things being researched and the conditions that may have caused them, rather than their observable and measurable properties (Cruickshank, 2011; Danermark et al., 2002).

Therefore, with critical realism as its orientating lens (Creswell, 2009), this research has its starting point in ontological rather than epistemological questions. This involves a subtle shift away from asking what we can know about the university decisions being made by the girls, towards questions about the causal powers that produce them. As a result, the research adopts an open and flexible qualitative design, which aligns with the open nature of social reality. In this way, it is attempting to look for 'meaning which is not immediately obvious' (Danermark et al., 2002) and incorporates first-person accounts of students' educational experiences. These are unearthed through the maps that are created by the girls about their life and education and act as a guide for individual elicitation interviews. It is here that the girls may disclose the causal mechanisms, powers, and their interactions that underly their educational decisions.

4.2.1 Revisiting the Interplay of Structure and Agency

Importantly, from a critical realist perspective, understanding how causal factors lead to different educational decisions involves examining the interplay of the emergent properties of 'structure' and 'agency'. Although most researchers in the social sciences would agree that 'in some sense 'structure' is objective whilst in some sense 'agency' entails subjectivity' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 1), it is Margaret Archer's argument around their analytical separability and temporal distinction, introduced in the previous chapter, that forms the methodological basis for this research. This means that structure and agency exist in society as ontologically separate phenomena with qualitatively different characteristics and powers (Danermark et al., 2002). They are each considered to be 'irreducible, autonomous and causally efficacious in their own right' (Carter, 2013) and, since they are not ontologically entangled, it is possible to explore the interactions and effects that they have on one another over time. This opens up the potential for explanatory accounts about how

structures constrain and enable the actions of agents and how agents reproduce and transform structures over time (Danermark et al., 2002).

For Archer, this takes place through her model of morphogenesis (Figure 3), which ‘formally integrates’ her theoretical standpoint with the practical research in this thesis (M. S. Archer & Morgan, 2020, p. 183). It acts as the methodological basis for this study by offering an explanatory account of the ‘form’ and ‘ingredients’ (Porpora, 2013) involved in the shaping of the girls’ educational trajectories. This begins with the tier of ‘structural conditioning’ that presents the social context in which agents find themselves (T1) and is also the context in which their socio-cultural interactions and actions take place (T2-T3) and result in either the morphogenetic transformation or morphostatic reproduction of their circumstances (T4) (M. S. Archer, 1995, 2003). By conceptualising this process as ‘little interacting cycles’ (Ali, 2016, p. 57), it becomes possible to unpack, across the girls’ lives, not only how their social contexts are objectively shaped (T1), but also how they subjectively respond within these context (T2-3) and how this shapes and reshapes their educational trajectories (T4).

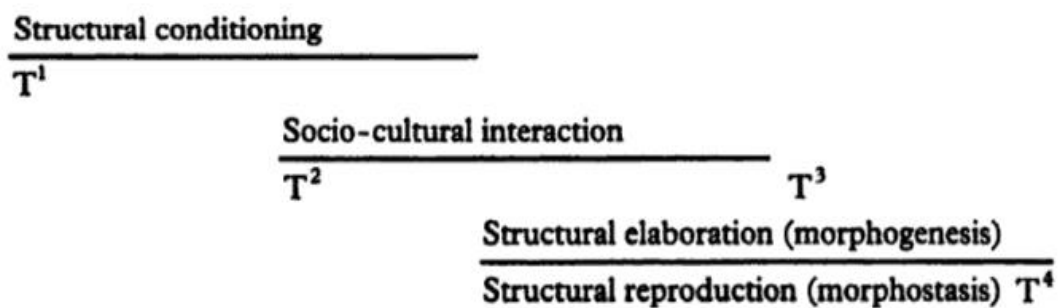


Figure 3: The Morphogenetic Cycle (Archer, 1995)

4.2.2 Researching Reflexivity

Central to the morphogenetic framework is that as people subjectively respond to their objective circumstances at the tier of socio-cultural interaction (T2-3), they engage in a ‘mediatory process’ which acts as a ‘link’ between structure and agency (M. S. Archer, 2003). This is the ‘inner reflexive dialogue’ that Archer (2007a, p. 16) describes as responsible for the ‘delineation of our concerns, the definition of our projects and, ultimately, the determination of our practices in society’. As the

previous chapter describes, it filters how agents respond differently to similar objective positionings as they weigh the constraining and enabling effects against their other concerns and in doing so confront the circumstances in which they find themselves, rather than becoming an integral part of them. Therefore, reflexivity can be explained as the 'causally powerful relationship between deliberation and action in people's social lives' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 37). It is a central point of analysis with which to observe the interplay of structure and agency as people decide what to do in 'situations that were not of their making' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 324). In view of this, while the working-class young women in this study cannot make what they please of their circumstances, dealing adequately with their reflexive internal conversations using the morphogenetic model, 'enables us to explain the *universal absence of similar responses in situations that are objectively similar*' (M. S. Archer, 2010b, p. 10). Applied to this study, it helps to explain why a small number of working-class girls are bucking a general trend among their similarly-situated peers in their achievement and application to high-tariff universities.

Therefore, in accepting Archer's (2010b, p. 12) invitation to 'explore the interplay between social conditioning and agential responses' the research also attends to the girls' reflexivity. In doing so, it deploys the understanding of reflexivity's heterogeneous nature that was developed in the previous chapter. To enable this, both inductive and theory-driven processes have been used to identify, analyse and report patterns from the data. Firstly, these are coded 'diversely' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by generating themes without trying to fit them into pre-existing categories or research on the topic. Informed by the first two phases of Archer's (1995, 2003) morphogenetic cycle (Figure 3), this 'bottom-up' approach helps to unpack how the participants' social contexts are objectively shaped (T1) and their actions and interactions within these contexts (T2-3) using themes strongly linked to the data themselves (see also Section 4.6 and Appendix D). In contrast, a 'top-down' thematic analysis of the data is driven by the study's analytical interest in Archer's modes of reflexivity and how each girl's 'inner reflexive dialogue' filters the ways in which they are subjectively responding to these social contexts (T2-3). This dual perspective is designed to support the overall analysis of how the young women's educational trajectories are shaped and re-shaped through 'little interacting cycles' (Ali, 2016, p. 57) and leading to their proposed engagement with HE (T4). Overall, it

is essential to keep an open, inductive mind not only to highlight the similarities and differences between the girls' experiences and perspectives but also to avoid missing any 'unanticipated insights' that may be generated (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

4.3 Life and Educational Histories

In Margaret Archer's work, she proposes that a qualitative exploration of an individual's 'life and work histories' (2007a, p. 98) can provide an understanding of how people engage in reflexive deliberation. Informed by this, a qualitative exploration of the girls' life and *educational* histories is used in this research to offer an account of how the practice of reflexive deliberation is informing their proposed application to high-tariff universities. Much like biographical research, the exploration of these histories 'uses the stories of individuals and other 'personal materials' to understand the individual life within its social context' (B. Roberts, 2002, p. 3). This gives external expression to the events that have occurred in the girls' lives and how these have been subjectively experienced (Mrozowicki & Domecka, 2013).

In this way, a biographical response to the research questions (outlined in Chapter 1) has the particular potential to support the study of reflexivity because it captures not only the 'description of factual situations' and the 'more or less chronological succession of events' but also 'reasons for action, evaluation of past choices and allocation of meaning to social context' (Caetano, 2015b, p. 233). Aligning with the critical realist principles underpinning Margaret Archer's work, it assumes the existence of an external world, but recognises that knowledge about it is socially determined, created through human action. While the girls might not be aware of the complex combination of social factors that explain their actions (Caetano, 2015b), adopting a qualitative biographical approach accepts their 'self-warrant' to explain how they have engaged in their own educational trajectories (M. S. Archer, 2007b).

Furthermore, the validity of this biographical study lies in its qualitative capacity to generate new and deeper forms of insight into human experience from 'the inside' and in rich and meaningful ways (Merrill & West, 2009). In contrast to research with a more objective, quantitative or scientific orientation, validity in this study is not rooted in reliable procedures or statistical principles. The girls are not seen as 'data'

but are 'knowing, creative, living subjects [...] demanding fundamental respect' (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 177). Given the richness and diversity of their lives and individual biographies, to standardise everything in advance would be more likely to lead to distorted and invalid outcomes. It is the girls alone who can explain the 'hows' and 'whys' of their educational trajectories and this cannot be predefined from the start (M. S. Archer, 2007b). As Merrill and West (2009) argue, 'variety is not the antithesis of validity' and getting to know the girls' experiences using the creative, participatory approaches, described in the sections that follow, can reveal subtleties of understanding easily lost in other methods.

4.4 Research Design

Using a qualitative and biographical research design, largely informed by Margaret Archer's work, the research incorporates sixteen high-achieving, working-class girls' 'first-person accounts' (M. S. Archer, 2007b) of their life and educational trajectories. All were in Years 12 or 13³ at the time the research was undertaken and were applying or proposing to apply to high-tariff universities in the UK. Meetings with the girls were facilitated via a social enterprise where they were engaging with a university and careers education programme, as introduced in Chapter 1 and detailed below. To prioritise their biographical narratives at a pace and via a means relevant to them, each girl used a selection of the materials in Figure 4 to create a 'map' of their educational and life experiences (see example in Figure 5) and then used the map to conduct an individual, face-to-face interview.

The life-mapping and interviewing took place at mutually convenient times that were arranged to fit around their attendance at sixth form or college, exam and revision periods and the researcher's teaching role. These differing schedules and commitments meant that while it had initially been planned for all the girls to undertake the life-mapping with a group of peers, some completed this alone or in pairs. It also meant that the time between each girl's life-mapping session and interview varied from between one week to six months. Contact was lost with two girls after the life-mapping session when they did not respond to emails to arrange

³ aged between 16 to 18

an interview. This was accepted as their choice to withdraw from the study at that stage.



Figure 4: Examples of stationery used to create the life-maps

4.4.1 The Students

At the time they took part in the research, nine students were in Year 12 and seven were in Year 13. They attended sixth forms and colleges across the LCR and chose to undertake the research voluntarily after responding to an email or to a post on the internal online platform of the social enterprise they were already involved in. This led to a convenience sample of students who were the most 'ready, willing, and able to take part in the study' (Given & Saumure, 2012). They all self-identified as female and their identification as high-achieving, working-class students with intentions to attend high-tariff universities aligned with most of the criteria for entry onto the programme with which they were already engaged. This was confirmed with staff at the social enterprise.

Described in this study as 'high-achieving' students, all the girls were predicted to achieve at least grades ABB across three A-level subjects, which reflect the typical

entry requirements of the 'high-tariff' universities where they were proposing to continue their studies. These institutions demand the highest number of UCAS 'tariff' points based on a calculation of the applicant's qualifications and grades. Since tariffs may fluctuate, for example due to changing demands for courses or as a result of contextual offers for students from underrepresented backgrounds (Montacute & Culliane, 2018), these 'high-tariff' institutions are identified in the current study using two established measures. Firstly, the Russell Group⁴, which includes twenty-four research-intensive universities and 15% of HEIs in the UK (Russell Group, 2016). Secondly, the 'Sutton Trust 30'⁵, representing thirty universities that make up approximately 10% of HEIs, including several highly selective universities that are not part of the Russell Group (Montacute & Culliane, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2011).

To address the complexity of identifying potential contributors as 'working class', all students were selected on the basis that they met at least one of three proxy criteria. The first criterion was eligibility for FSM, which is widely used in the UK context to indicate that a student faces considerable socio-economic disadvantage (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Ilie, Sutherland, & Vignoles, 2017; Jerrim, 2021; Taylor, 2018). However, not all families entitled to the free meals choose to claim (DfE, 2013) and

⁴ University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, Durham University, University of Edinburgh, University of Exeter, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics & Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, Queen Mary, University of London, Queen's University Belfast, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London, University of Warwick, University of York

⁵ University of Bath, University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, University of Durham, University of Edinburgh, University of Exeter, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, Lancaster University, University of Leeds, University of Leicester, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics, University of Manchester, University of Newcastle, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, University of Reading, Royal Holloway University of London, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University of St Andrews, University of Strathclyde, University of Surrey, University College London, University of Warwick and University of York.

approximately one in five of low income children are missed using this measure (Jerrim, 2021). Therefore, also in this basket of proxies for ‘working class’ were the student being the first generation in her immediate family to attend university as a young participant⁶ and the student living in a ‘quintile 1’ postcode area according to the POLAR index, presented in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 as having the lowest rates of young participation in HE across the UK (HEFCE, 2017).

While these three key measures offered a ‘pragmatic solution’ (Ilie et al., 2017) to capturing the materiality of the girls’ working-class backgrounds using information readily available from the social enterprise, it is important to acknowledge that they do not capture the socio-cultural contexts of class. Furthermore, the proxies do not differentiate for all factors that are indicative of a student’s socio-economic background and mask some of the subtler differences in individual positions or orientations to HE. To do justice to the complex social phenomenon under investigation, as well as to the individuals involved in the study, ‘good research takes time’ (Grace, 1998, p. 203). Therefore, a fuller account of the girls’ gender and class backgrounds is drawn from the analysis of their first-person narratives to show the differing structural and cultural properties they reflexively encounter and respond to during their educational trajectories (M. S. Archer, 2007a).

An overview of the students who contributed to the research is depicted in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Overview of the sixteen high-achieving, working-class girls who contributed to the research

Name (Pseudonym)	School Year	A-levels	University Interests/Intentions
Rachel	Year 13	Physics, maths, politics, psychology	Physics; University of Manchester, University of Bristol
Haley	Year 13	Physics, chemistry, maths	Chemical Engineering; University of Cambridge
Neala	Year 13	Statistics, biology, chemistry	Veterinary Science; Royal Veterinary College London, University of Liverpool

⁶ In contrast to being a ‘mature’ participant, aged 21 and above.

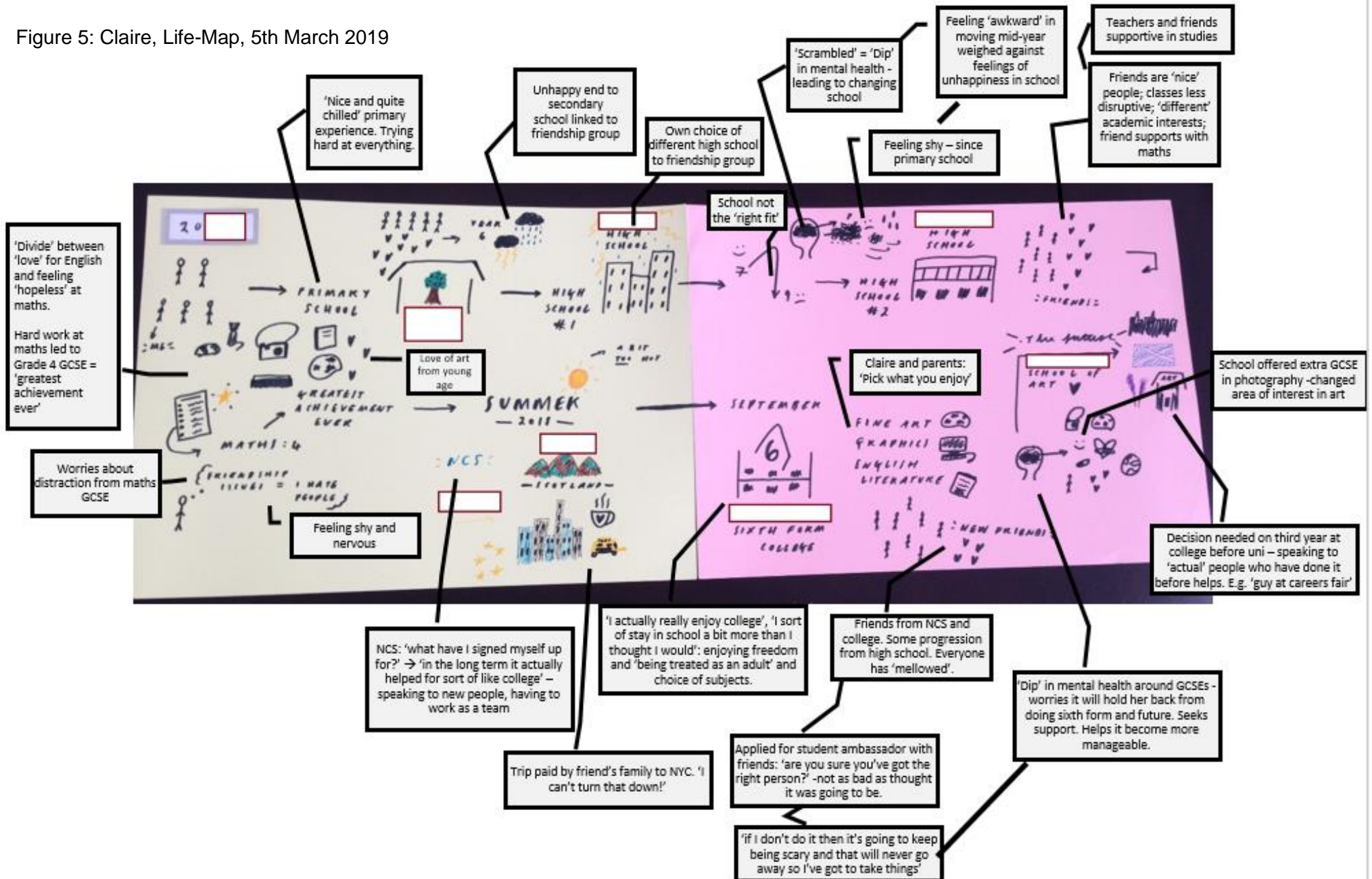
Mollie	Year 13	Biology, maths, economics	Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) or Economics; University of Oxford, University of York, University of Southampton, University of Hull
Estella	Year 13	Biology, chemistry, maths	Medicine; University of Liverpool, Cardiff University, Queens University Belfast, University of Leicester
Gaby	Year 13	Law, biology, history	Law; University of Manchester
Becky	Year 13	Biology, chemistry, maths	Chemistry; Durham University or University of York
Claire	Year 12	Fine art, graphics, English literature	Art (and foundation year); Manchester School of Art, University of Edinburgh, Glasgow School of Art
Alice	Year 12	Chemistry, biology, English language	Medicine; University of Liverpool
Freya	Year 12	Maths, physics, chemistry	Economics; University of Manchester, University of Edinburgh, Newcastle University
Amelia	Year 12	Maths, biology, chemistry	Medicine; University of Liverpool
Jayde	Year 12	Maths	Maths/Philosophy; University of York, University of Leeds, University of Oxford
Giulianna	Year 12	Biology, maths, chemistry	Medicine; Newcastle University, University of Liverpool, University of Edinburgh, University of Cambridge
Nat	Year 12	Economics, maths, dance	Economics; University of Leeds, Lancaster University, University of Nottingham, University of York, University of Birmingham
Leah	Year 12	Biology, chemistry, physics	Medicine; Newcastle University, University of York, University of Liverpool
Tegan	Year 12	Biology, physics, chemistry	Medicine; University of Cambridge, University of Manchester, University of Liverpool

4.4.2 Life-Mapping

The open and creative nature of the life-mapping task used in the first stage of the research gave the sixteen girls scope to discern what they included and to present the interrelation of elements as they understood them. This offered more flexibility than other structured tools for recording life trajectories, such as life history charts, may have done (Neale, 2017). It was also important because one of the methodological challenges of exploring an internal activity, such as reflexivity, is that it does not only take the form of language. As Mannay (2016) argues, telling a story about the self is not necessarily engendered in purely verbal activities and therefore participants' life and educational journeys need to be explored in novel ways. She draws attention to the potential of creative, visual techniques to be employed as tools that unlock new understandings for participants and for researchers to achieve 'something richer and more distinctive' (p. 3).

The 'life-mapping' task was therefore developed to offer an 'avenue' for the girls to express experiences and understandings for which words might not be immediately available (Guillemin & Drew, 2010, p. 178). To achieve this, they were invited to draw a representation of their life and educational journeys spanning their past and present. Across their life-maps, each girl recorded people, events, turning points, experiences or other factors that were personally significant to them. These are shown in the example life-map in Figure 5, below, with annotations to highlight the personally significant factors which Claire drew attention to during the life-mapping session and subsequent elicitation interview.

Figure 5: Claire, Life-Map, 5th March 2019



Although the life-mapping technique is particularly appropriate for eliciting biographical data (Kesby, 2000), this was not limited in this research to retrospective experiences. Twelve of the girls also used a small person-shaped cut-out that created a space for them to include their future plans, whilst four chose to record their future as part of the life-map itself. This element was designed to reflect how the narratives of their educational experiences may start in the past but 'intermingle' with their present and future (Worth, 2011), as shown in Figure 6, below. The annotations highlight the significant factors relating to Amelia's future plans which she drew attention to during the life-mapping session and subsequent elicitation interview.

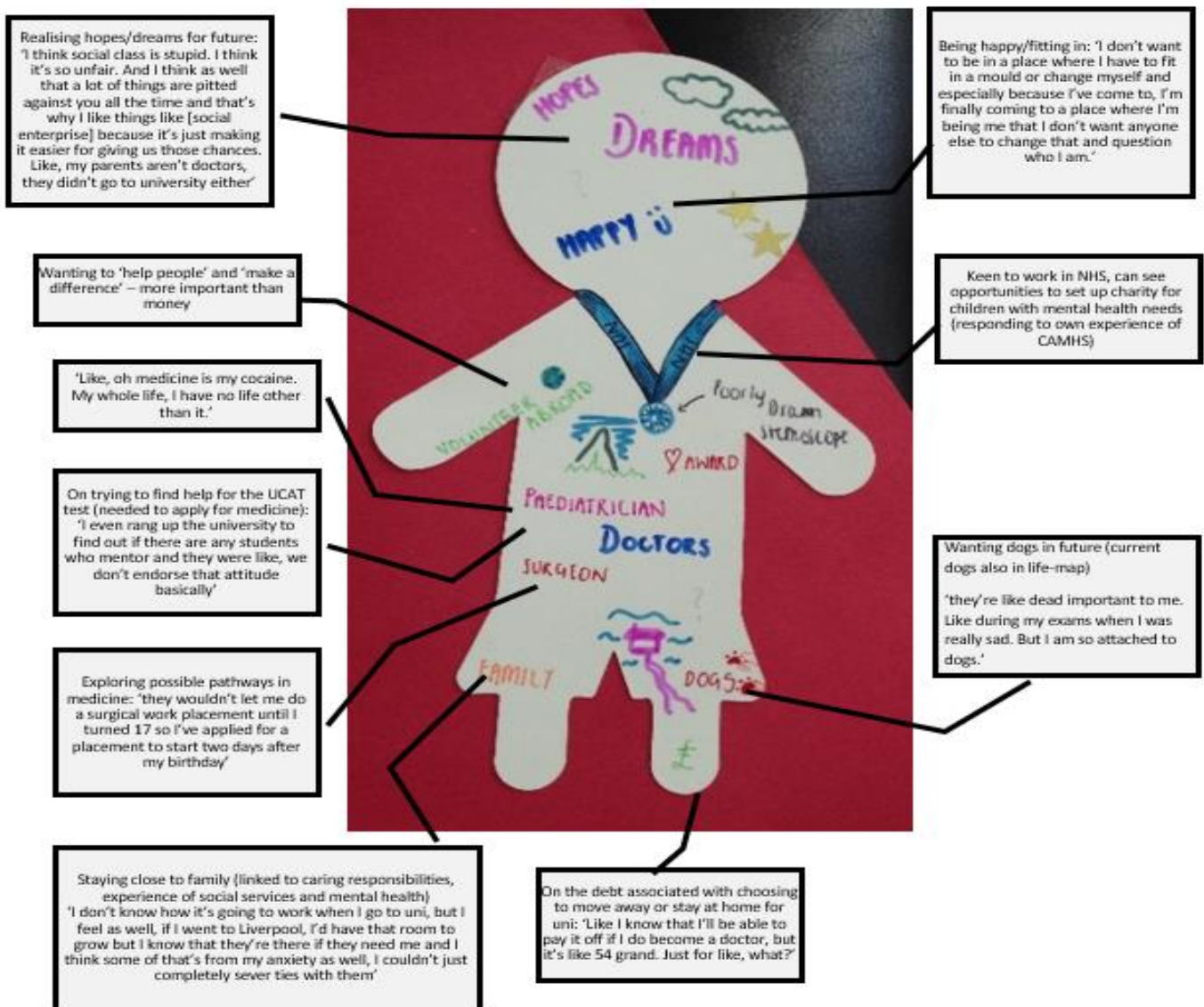


Figure 6: Amelia, 'Future me', 5th March 2019

Similar techniques and 'visual' materials are used in research practice across a range of disciplines (Chaplin, 1994; Mannay, 2016) to address questions and issues from diverse theoretical contexts (Rose, 2007, p. 238). While some researchers work with 'found' images that exist distinct from the research project (Rose, 2007), this study uses visual materials as 'part of the process of doing research' *with* the participants (Thomson, 2008, p. 8). In particular, it seeks to emphasise the 'creativity' involved in their production, which offered the girls an alternative source of 'communication, expression or revelation' (Gauntlett, 2007). This helped to establish 'another layer of knowledge to the research' (Worth, 2011, p. 406) that would not have been possible through a verbal or written account alone.

4.4.3 Elicitation Interviews

As stand-alone data, the life-maps are orientated around how and what the girls chose to contribute and each one is deeply personal and specific to the individual who created it (Worth, 2011). Therefore, to understand the significance of the words, images and symbols they used to present their experiences, and for these to have particular value for the research, the life-maps needed to work together with opportunities for the girls to explain and further reflect on them (Neale, 2017). From the sixteen girls who created a life-map, fourteen conducted an individual face-to-face interview between one week and six months after the initial creation of their life-map. Using the maps as a 'generator of information' (Pratt, 1995) was intended to foreground the girls' subjective responses rather than any assumptions of their experiences. As Mannay (2010, p. 102) asserts 'it is human beings who speak to each other and the lone image is an inadequate tool for understanding other people's worlds'. Therefore, the goal of these interviews was to ensure that understanding of the life-maps was created *with* those involved rather than imposing external interpretations (Thomson, 2008).

To encourage the girls to explain their life-maps and expand on their stories whilst maintaining a thematic focus on their educational experiences and decision-making, the interviews required a compromise between unstructured narrative and questioning. Each interview session began by asking the student to 'talk through'

their life-map and used short utterances of encouragement to prompt them to continue or develop their narration. This elicited individualised responses that emerged more naturally from the life-map than forcing the young women into a highly-formulised or artificial mode of communication (Sayer, 1992). Questions were planned for each of the girls in advance of the interview (Appendix A) and were based on their life-map and the conversations that were recorded during its creation (Appendix B). However, these assisted more as a guide than as a strict written schedule. Indeed, the questions were sometimes answered by the girls during the narration of their map, prior to asking them. Furthermore, since the research has a specific thematic focus on HE decision-making, questions were sometimes purposefully used to interrupt or change the direction of the interview 'to ensure the interviewees speak about it, while still leaving in enough room for relating biographical strands' (Rosenthal, 2013, p. 51). Overall, this supported a purposeful inquiry with the map acting as an external reference point for the discussion (Neale, 2017), which was audio recorded then transcribed by the researcher (Appendix C).

4.5 Research *with* the Girls

The girls were involved in the generation of knowledge about their life and educational experiences throughout both the life-mapping and subsequent interviewing. The use of these methods was intended to avoid simply the 'extraction' of information, which could have positioned the girls passively in the research (Veale, 2008), and instead ensured that the research was undertaken *with* them not *on* them (Thomson, 2008). Since it is not for the researcher to decide whether a matter affects their participants (Lundy, 2007), the life-mapping activity was designed as a creative way to give prominence to the girls' own frameworks of understanding their educational trajectories (Pain & Francis, 2003). Facilitating this 'participant focussed understanding' (Mannay, Staples, & Edwards, 2017) was central to avoiding a tokenistic approach to their involvement. Indeed, a priority in designing the research was for the girls to be presented as the 'active agents' described in Chapter 3, who Margaret Archer (2007a, p. 6) contends 'can exercise some governance in their own lives'.

By encouraging the girls' genuine involvement rather than restricting their roles to only that of research subjects (Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011), the research aligns itself with the 'legally binding obligation'⁷ and 'moral imperative' that children's and young people's views are sought in matters affecting them (Lundy, 2007). This meant using the opportunities available during the life-mapping sessions and elicitation interviews to create understanding of the life-maps *with* those involved rather than 'revealing it' (Thomson, 2008). It also meant showing respect for a diverse range of perspectives and opinions which were discussed *with* the girls rather than being substituted for more 'acceptable' interpretations (Lundy, 2018, p. 733). Overall, this has been intended to facilitate more nuanced and meaningful understandings and clarification of the content and structure of the life-maps than would otherwise have been possible (Lundy et al., 2011).

4.5.1 Self-Disclosure

With the research emphasis on the girls' genuine involvement and since there were no face-to-face meetings prior to the first life-mapping session, it was important to find a way for those involved in these sessions to quickly feel comfortable working together. Informed by how Bassett, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic, and Chapman (2008) describe 'self-disclosure' as a useful strategy to establish trust with teenagers, each life-mapping session began by sharing a map of my own life and educational experiences (Figure 7). This involved talking through experiences, people and places that were significant during my educational journey and allowing the girls opportunities to comment or ask questions about them.

⁷ Under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

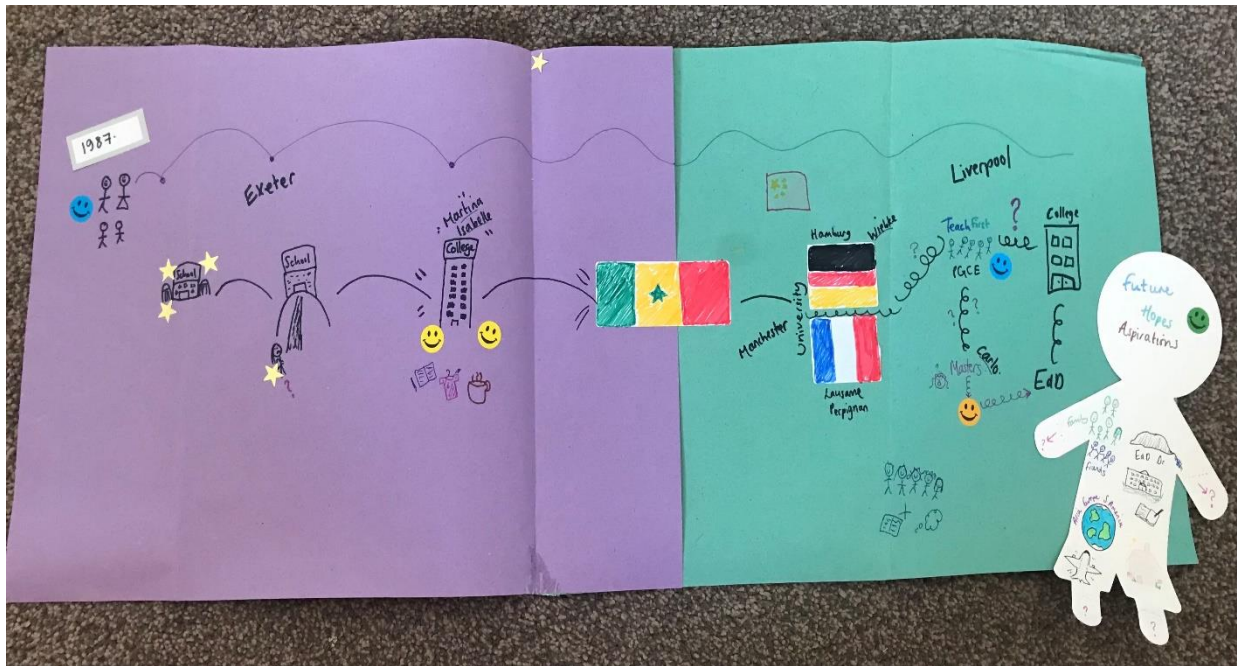


Figure 7: Katherine [researcher], Life-Map. April, 2018.

It was pre-empted that some of the girls would use the example life-map as a model for the structure, images and symbols in their own life-map. However, this was balanced against its potential to engage the students from the very start of the research. Self-disclosure on the part of a researcher may violate the ‘norms’ of an interview setting in which the interviewee has the role of providing new information in a ‘question and answer’ format (Abell, Locke, Condor, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006), yet in the life-mapping setting it was not detrimental to the content the girls produced. Indeed, it evoked points of commonality which ignited conversation (Scarles, 2010) and built rapport (Warren & Vince, 2004). This encouraged, rather than suppressed, the girls’ sharing of their individual and personal experiences.

Furthermore, since the goal was to undertake research *with* the girls, preparing and sharing personal and emotive information via the life-map assisted in equalising rather than distancing relationships with them. In this way, self-disclosure in the form of the life-map helped to confirm that the stranger the girls were speaking with had some understanding of their feelings and experiences (Berger, 2015). This included exposing challenges, emotions and moments of self-doubt through the example life-map with the intention of actively engaging the girls in an open and trusting relationship where they might feel willing to do the same (Guillemin & Drew, 2010).

With its potential to transcend a 'surface level exchange' (Scarles, 2010), the example life-map became a valuable platform for facilitating the flow of 'potentially uncomfortable personal talk' (Warren & Vince, 2004).

In view of this, the notion of a tidy insider/outsider binary has limited utility for describing the 'shifting relationships' involved in working with the girls (Thomson & Gunter, 2011). Instead, Milligan (2016) describes how a researcher may enter the field as a 'knowledgeable outsider' but become an 'inbetweenner'. Aspects of my own life-history, identity and personality that were contained in the life-map and its telling were thus used to support interactions and the sharing of information by highlighting both commonalities and differences with the girls (Stroobants, 2005). On the one hand, despite beginning the research as a stranger to them, 'active' attempts to shift this positioning and become an approachable person were made through similarities in our decisions and academic interests that were evoked during the initial sharing of the example life-map (Milligan, 2016). On the other hand, positively evoking differences also highlighted detachment from the girls' lives in order to encourage them to recount and expand on the 'how' and 'why' of the educational trajectories they had taken (M. S. Archer, 2007b). This 'inbetweenner' positioning was used to encourage 'more authentic accounts' (Milligan, 2016) yet avoid the girls seeing the research as an exercise in 'finding the right answers' (Bassett et al., 2008).

4.5.2 The Role of the Researcher

As creators of the life-maps, it is the girls themselves who are the most relevant individuals to interpret and give meaning to their words and drawings (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). They were encouraged in this both through the informal conversations that took place during the life-mapping sessions and in the individual elicitation interviews. Each girl's interpretation of their own life-map is significant, and it was the researcher's job to listen to how these were described, explained and made meaningful. However, the role of the researcher involved not only listening to what each individual was saying, but also listening for what was said overall. As Guillemin and Drew (2010, p. 184) describe, it is the researcher who is 'best able to undertake the overall analysis and interpret the data within the context of the other data and

overall theoretical frame'. This involved 'listening' for what was said across the conversations that were recorded during the six life-mapping sessions, each of the fourteen elicitation interviews, and in the context of the sixteen life-maps.

This 'listening' does not grant researchers supremacy in their contribution to knowledge (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009) but means that, in this shifting of power, they have an ethical obligation to reflexively monitor the analysis and use of the research on behalf of the participants. This reflects the triple function of reflexivity within this research, where it is not only the object of study but is used as a means of eliciting information and also for monitoring research practices (Caetano, 2015b). As Mason (2002, p. 5) suggests, reflexivity in this sense constitutes a way of doing qualitative research that involves 'confronting and often challenging your own assumptions'. Therefore, although the researcher plays a role in the 'context of discovery', they must also be careful not to claim to know the participants' thoughts better than they do or to substitute the participants' interpretations with their own (M. S. Archer, 2007b). Their role is to bring 'their expertise, their ability to theorise, to see patterns, and to maintain distance from the data generated' (Guillemin & Drew, 2010, p. 184).

Since there can be 'no definitive criteria to judge the "truth"' of what the girls have created or said (Easton, 2010, p. 123), the research is not looking for the 'most correct ways' of understanding their experiences. However, through 'cycles of research and reflection' (Easton, 2010), the researcher can engage critically with previous and current ways of understanding the educational experiences and decision-making of working-class girls. This includes searching, evaluating and accurately representing the existing literature, and ensuring the recording and reporting of girls' experiences are clear and accurate (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). So, while their narratives can only be known indirectly to a third party through 'fallible interpretation' (M. S. Archer, 2007b), it is possible to make reasonable judgements about them based on the evidence available. The claims to knowledge emerging from this research may therefore be 'justified epistemically' if they are congruent with what is believed at this time to be within the 'ontological conditions of possibility' (Cruickshank, 2011).

4.6 Thematic Analysis

The approach that structured the analysis and interpretation of data was thematic and involved 'searching across a data set [...] to find repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Applied here as a method within its own right, thematic analysis enjoys relative theoretical freedom and is thus compatible with a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Although Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a linear, six-phase guide to thematic analysis, they describe how it strikes a balance between 'clear demarcation' of how to undertake a thematic analysis, whilst maintaining enough flexibility for the researcher to make 'active choices' about the most appropriate form of analysis for their study (2006). This facilitates the 'dual' approach to the analysis that, as described in Section 4.2.2, uses both inductive and theory driven processes to align with Archer's morphogenetic cycle (Figure 3) in order to offer a 'rich and detailed, yet complex' account of the shaping of the girls' educational trajectories and proposed engagement with HE (Nowell et al., 2017).

To support with sorting and organising the data during the thematic analysis, the qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) *NVivo 12* was used as the data were coded diversely. The mere use of *NVivo* did not improve the quality of the analysis, however, it was an efficient and effective tool to assist in managing a relatively large amount of transcribed data generated from the interviews and life-mapping sessions (Paulus, Woods, Atkins, & Macklin, 2017). Therefore, while *NVivo 12* was not capable of the 'intellectual and conceptualising processes required to transform the data' (Nowell et al., 2017), it did facilitate a more streamlined approach to the classification, sorting, arranging, searching and combining of their different elements. Appendix D, for example, shows how the QDAS allowed clear visibility of different codes and easy access to where they were located. This was performed alongside a manual process of coding informed specifically by Margaret Archer's modes of reflexivity, which were identified within the data and sorted into tables created for this purpose (Appendix E). It is through this tool that theoretically informed patterns and themes relating reflexivity could also be defined and refined.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the entirety of this research study, it has been important to continually monitor ethical issues using the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Researchers* (BERA, 2018). Their application has not been problematic, however, care was taken to ensure that ethical decision-making was an 'actively deliberative, ongoing and iterative process' (BERA, 2018, p. 2). Responsibilities to the participants have been of particular importance since the research is eliciting young women's experiences of structural inequalities. It has operated within an 'ethic of respect' for the girls to ensure that the research process has been attentive towards these inequalities and all were treated 'fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice' (BERA, 2018, p. 6). Informed by this, the research has recognised each girl's right to information about the study and sought their voluntary informed consent to participate. As 16 to 18 year olds, their age and maturity meant that they were judged to be 'capable of forming their own views' about their participation in the study (BERA, 2018, p. 15) and communicated directly with the researcher via email.

Nevertheless, staff at the social enterprise which facilitated contact with the girls were closely involved and agreed appropriate safeguarding procedures. Following the organisation's guidance, a member of their staff was copied into all email communication with the girls. The staff member was therefore always aware of the times and locations of research sessions and interviews. However, their involvement in arranging these also meant that it was necessary to ensure that the students who expressed an interest in taking part really did want to do so. The students' choice in their involvement at each stage was central to the participatory nature of the study and it was important that they felt no obligation to volunteer because of their connection with the social enterprise's other programmes. Therefore, prior to deciding whether or not they wished to be involved, all potential participants were sent an information sheet (Appendix F) to read from which they could find out about the research. Not all those who were approached and sent the information were willing or available to participate and those who declined or did not respond were not re-contacted.

Since the precise course of the research or its findings could not be predicted in advance, seeking the girls' consent went beyond a 'tick box exercise' (Russell & Barley, 2019). BERA's (2018, p. 9) guidelines on voluntary informed consent state that 'researchers should do everything they can to ensure that all potential participants understand [...] what is involved in a study'. Therefore, prior to the life-mapping sessions, the nature of the research was verbally explained to those who volunteered to take part and they were given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss this with me and each other. Although it was a necessary requirement to document the girls' consent using a formal written form (Appendix G), this in itself was not considered to constitute their consent (Metro, 2014). Instead, the face-to-face meetings allowed for a more interpersonal process of seeking the girls' consent where they could come to a better understanding of what the project was about and on what terms they would participate (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Additionally, since there was a gap of up to six months between the two parts of the research, each girl's ongoing consent was not assumed (BERA, 2018). It was explained to each of them that it was for them to decide whether or not they continued their involvement with the research at any time during the study (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Their right to withdraw was reiterated when arranging the individual interviews and the research process was explained and discussed again prior to the start of the interview.

4.7.1 Privacy and Confidentiality

While the default position during the research has been to maintain confidentiality, there could have been moments when the right legal and moral course of action would have been to disclose information for the safeguarding of the young women (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). Since no such circumstances occurred, it was possible to avoid deliberately breaching their confidentiality in this way.

Therefore, with regard to each girl's right to privacy, the data collected was handled and reported with care and treated confidentially by complying with the *Data Protection Act* (1998) and, more recently, the *General Data Protection Regulations* (2018) (BERA, 2018). This involved ensuring that data were kept securely using password protection and secure computer networks.

One of the main ways that the research has endeavoured to preserve confidentiality has been through the anonymisation of data (BERA, 2018). This means that precautions were taken to avoid the possible identification of any student and identifying features have been changed, removed or obscured in descriptions, extracts and images presented in this research (Wiles, 2013). The visual and biographical nature of the research meant that there were often distinctive details or stories in the data that needed to be disguised to protect the girls from identification in the findings. Careful consideration has been given to this to ensure that it has not distorted the data or affected the integrity of the research (Wiles et al., 2008). This has included anonymising the social enterprise that facilitated access to the students, since the girls may have been identifiable through their association with this organisation. Similarly, since the girls could have been recognised in the findings by the social enterprise, pseudonyms were allocated and the girls were not given the option of using their real names.

4.8 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has presented the methodology of the research undertaken for this thesis and explained how it has been designed to capture the exercise of reflexivity among the sixteen high-achieving, working-class girls who took part. Corresponding closely with the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, the research methodology draws on the critical realist backcloth to Margaret Archer's work to inform its ontological positioning and offer new ways of answering questions about university decision making. This makes an important contribution to methodological knowledge that is discussed in the concluding chapter (Chapter 6) alongside the novel use of creative methods for the purpose of researching reflexivity.

From a practical perspective, the chapter has presented in detail the design of the research, including information about the girls who contributed and its methods of data collection. Linked to these, it has discussed the nature of the girls' involvement and the researcher's self-disclosure, which were intended to create understanding *with* the girls and show respect for a range of perspectives. Ethical considerations have been continually monitored throughout the research study, and while the

application of BERA's guidelines has not been problematic, the chapter has explained how responsibilities to the girls go beyond this and have been appropriately addressed. Importantly, the chapter has also detailed how the analysis was undertaken and highlights the dual approach that situates the findings within the context of the other data and deductively within the overall theoretical framework. Themes that have emerged from this analysis are interpreted and discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

The Reflexive Negotiation of Constraints and Enablements in Pathways to University

5.1 Introduction

Drawing on Margaret Archer's theoretical concepts (2003, 2007a, 2012) to offer new insights into the educational decision making of young women from working-class backgrounds, this chapter explains the ways in which the girls introduced in Chapter 4 are learning to capitalise on enablements and circumvent obstacles which may elasticate and contract their intended university projects. It is argued here that many, but not all, of the strategies the girls are developing are typical of Archer's autonomous reflexives who articulate projects that are leading to discontinuity with their original social settings and have the potential to 'burst their contextual bounds' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 228). Yet while Margaret Archer's research is focussed on adults who are demonstrating dominant and established forms of reflexivity, what is more evident in the life and educational histories of the girls in this study is reflexivity 'in development'. They cannot make what they please of their circumstances, but by dealing adequately with their reflexive internal conversations it is possible to explain how they commence and continue along very different pathways to what more deterministic accounts of working-class educational engagement might have predicted for them. The findings presented here challenge more static assumptions about working-class perceptions and responses to HE and, through the girls' interactions with constraints and enablements, demonstrate how they are confronting the circumstances in which they find themselves, rather than becoming an integral part of them.

5.2 Developing Reflexivity

It is not surprising that when the girls find themselves in situations that are 'relished rather than repudiated' they invest increasingly more of themselves into them (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 195). Indeed, the fact of many of the girls' successful academic elastication in their early years of school constitutes a significant objective

enablement that has sustained their engagement with education over time. As Figure 8, Figure 9 and Figure 10 show, within their life-maps the girls presented primary school as a nice place, surrounded by smiley faces and stars because 'it was just happy, it wasn't stressful' (Haley, interview, August 2018).



Figure 8: 'Primary School' - Haley, life-map, May 2018

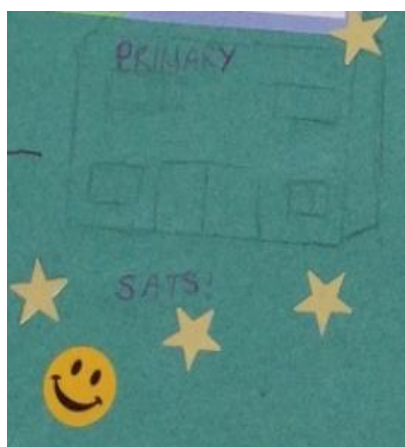


Figure 9: 'Primary School' - Mollie, life-map, October 2018



Figure 10: 'Primary School' - Amelia, life-map, March 2019

This does not mean that their educational journeys resemble the well-rehearsed stories of high-achieving girls who appear able to glide through education collecting high grades and paving their own ways to a bright future (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). The pursuit of their university projects is necessarily shaped by properties and powers relating to their social class and gender, which they reflexively interpret and actively respond to. This increasingly amplifies change in their lives as they aspire to pathways and articulate projects beyond those predicated on their original social backgrounds (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 202). So, while their pleasurable or satisfying early educational experiences set the scene for ways of thinking, acting and being in relation to what the girls care about and commit themselves to, they are endorsing ambitions with no precedent for how to respond to the opportunities and obstacles that they activate. To this end, this chapter begins by exploring how the girls are learning to avoid society's 'snakes' and climb its 'ladders' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 109) in situations that are progressively discontinuous with their original social settings and set them apart from their families and similarly situated peers. As above, images from the girls' life-maps are used to illustrate key themes throughout

the rest of this chapter. They have been selected as relevant representations of the girls' visual depictions of constraints and enablements and help to triangulate the quotes that are included from interviews and the life-mapping sessions.

5.2.1 Contextual Discontinuity

To explain how the girls are reflexively responding to the constellation of constraints and enablements that they activate in pursuit of their academic projects, it is important to pay attention to how they are developing their capacity to exercise agency in initially unfamiliar educational contexts. As high-achieving, working-class girls, whose parents have little prior engagement with non-compulsory education, the girls are not replicating the 'familiar contours' of the social settings into which they were born. Instead, as they embark on ambitious educational trajectories, they are cultivating a repertoire of new experiences that are 'progressively discontinuous' from those of their families and similarly-situated peers (M. S. Archer, 2007a, pp. 194-195). It is not surprising, therefore, that the girls are learning to draw on their own resources to inform their educational decision making and navigate their pathways through school and into university, rather than relying on exchanges with other people. As Amelia describes:

There's no one that I can speak to. Not to sound bad but like there's no one like on my level. Like they think like way differently to what I think and it's a bit weird sometimes (Amelia, life-mapping session, August 2019)

Since so many aspects of their journeys to university are different to the experiences and knowledge of those closest to them, much of the girls' decision making bears a growing resemblance to the orientation of Archer's 'autonomous reflexives' (2003, 2007a). In other words, they are becoming progressively self-sufficient in defining the academic projects they consider worthwhile and the practices that will help them to navigate the constraints and enablements that they encounter in pursuit of them (M. S. Archer, 2003).

5.2.2 Self-Reliance

One of the ways in which their self-sufficiency emerges is through the girls' relationships at home. Although the girls' parents clearly care about their daughters' education, they are increasingly unable to offer practical guidelines for a 'world' that is unfamiliar to them (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 195). Therefore, compared to the directed or structured guidance offered by the parents of their middle-class peers, support from the girls' families was often more implicitly given (Reay et al., 2009). Haley, for instance, describes how her parents let her pick her secondary school:

they definitely let me pick what I wanted my first-choice school to be and my second, they were really supportive like that (Haley, interview, August 2018)

Despite the support and encouragement that most of the girls' parents heap on their daughters, it was the girls rather than their parents who were positioned as the 'educational expert' in the family (Reay & Ball, 1998, p. 435). As such, they were considered to know what was best for their education and took responsibility for managing their own academic projects and discerning how far to commit to them in the face of constraints and enablements, often from a young age. For Haley, this meant picking a first-choice secondary school even though, as depicted in her life-map in Figure 11, it involved a seven-mile bus ride across the city each day:



Figure 11: 'Seven-mile bus ride' - Haley, life-map, May 2018

I could have gone to the school round the corner from my house, but I thought just for the future and for my education I wanted to go somewhere better (Haley, life-mapping session, May 2018)

This secondary school was available and it was attractive to Haley as a place to succeed in her academic ambitions. With the decision to apply left in her own hands, Haley actively resists a 'complex of external constraints' that may have prevented other students from applying (Reay & Ball, 1998). Even with the travel and being the only one of her primary-school friends to go there, it is what she commits herself to.

In this way, although the girls' decisions may be nurtured by their parents, they are very clearly beginning to make their own ways through the world.

To this end, needing to take charge of their own direction without falling back on family expectations or guidance, leaves the girls with high levels of apparent autonomy in their educational decision making. They are becoming increasingly self-reliant in learning how to reflexively mediate the constraints and enablements that they encounter as they respond to situations where there are no familiar templates or resources already available to them. The effort they invest in this is particularly pronounced among the seven young women applying for medicine and veterinary sciences, who must evidence significant amounts of work experience in their university applications. In their cases, it is often not only parents but also their schools that are unable to provide practical support with the girls' intended futures.

My school, they've never, coz they're just a normal regular state school, they've never really seen anyone who wants to go into medicine. It's only those odd few throughout the years so I was on my own. So they've never actually organised work experience for me. It's all sort of, all of it I've done on my own. (Amelia, interview, August 2019)

Like Amelia, the girls are forced to rely largely on their own initiatives to resist these potential constraints and go to significant lengths to find and arrange suitable placements and voluntary work experience. For example, Neala contacted over fifty different places to secure her seven work experience (WEx) placements with animals (listed in her life-map in Figure 12) and Tegan rang up her local hospital and 'bugged them for like a week' (interview, September 2019) until they let her in.

However, in doing so and because of doing so, the girls are also learning to cope more successfully on their own:

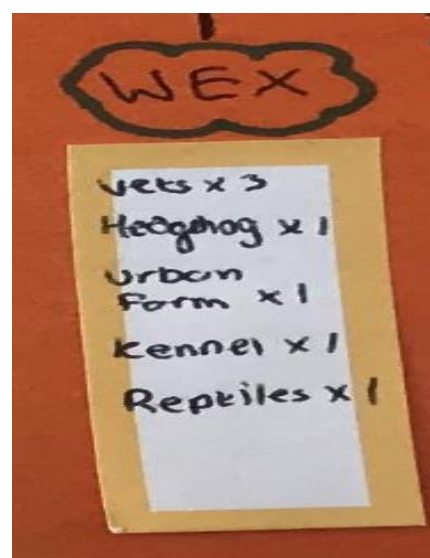


Figure 12: 'List of Work Experience' - Neala, life-map, October 2018

I suppose it could have been easier if they'd done it, but I think, it's just set it sure for me that this is what I want to do, coz if I didn't then why would I keep going out and pushing myself to do all these new things (Amelia, interview, August 2019)

And when preparing for an interview, I just realise just how much volunteering has helped me with like speaking and just like coming up with examples to situations (Estella, interview, February 2019)

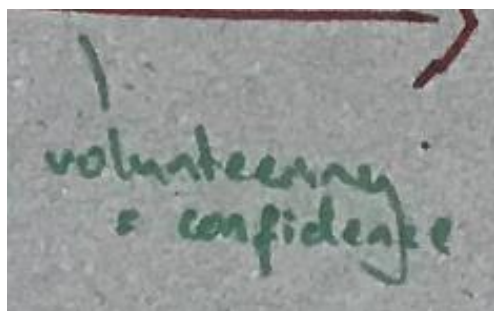


Figure 13: 'Volunteering and Confidence' - Estella, life-map, October 2018

By having to make their way independently of others and in unfamiliar settings, the girls are learning to trust their own resources and, as Estella makes explicit in her life-map in Figure 13, they are gaining increasing levels of confidence to do so. The experiences they gain and their confidence in learning to handle them are mutually reinforcing and 'together they generate self-reliance' that helps the girls to cope more successfully on their own (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 194). It is this confidence to exploit their power as agents in

circumstances that are discontinuous with their prior experiences that continues to underpin their development of self-reliant, autonomous reflexivity and prompts them to seek out further novel experiences in pursuit of their academic and career goals.

5.2.3 Marshalling Inner Resources

Bolstered by this positive 'reinforcement loop' in which the satisfaction the girls derive from succeeding in their new experiences constitutes an enablement to seeking out more of the same (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 202), the girls are encouraged to adopt further academic and career projects outside of familiar settings. However, the start of Freya's educational trajectory shows how a positive reinforcement loop may also act in reverse, with negative experiences of education creating a constraining cycle that increasingly contracts students' academic success and distances them from opportunities beyond their natal context. This is particularly clear in her account of being what she describes as a 'slow bloomer' at primary school and achieving 'quite bad grades' in her Year 6 SATs (Interview, July 2019),

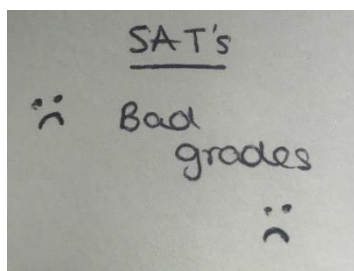


Figure 14: 'Bad Grades' - Freya, life-map, March 2019

and as depicted by the unhappy faces in her life-map in Figure 14. These are tests that can have objective consequences for pupils by constraining, for example, the types of secondary schools they attend and their predicted grades at GCSE. Indeed, for girls in particular 'marks delivered in pen' can be a powerful affective force that reinforces pre-existing beliefs about their academic abilities or potential (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020). Like many working-

class students (L. Archer et al., 2018; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008), Freya's results meant that she was placed in the lower sets⁸ for all her subjects in her first two years of secondary school (Years 7 and 8) while many of her friends achieved highly enough to be placed in the top set. However, this did not prevent her from conceiving an ambitious academic project and it is by virtue of her developing autonomous reflexivity, rather than by chance or contingency (Cieslik, 2006), that she was able to respond strategically to these constraints and break away from what these circumstances predicted for her.

With so many objective constraints in her pathway, it might be surprising that Freya was able to become one of the high-achieving students in this study. However, among new classmates who did not want to learn when she did, Freya was 'edged into a realm of 'aloneness'' in the lower sets at school (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 195). As she recorded in her life-map through drawings of sad faces and upside-down stickers of smiling faces, she was distinctly unhappy (Figure 15). Aware of the obstacles that surrounded her, she explains how 'it kind of like kicked in then that I'm actually going to have to work hard to get out of this set' (Interview, July 2019). To thrive in this setting relied on her becoming sufficiently self-reliant to cope successfully on her

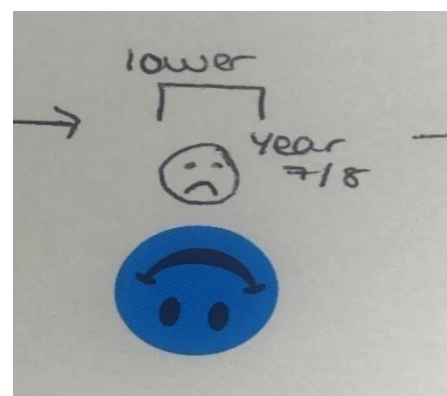


Figure 15: 'Aloneness' - Freya, life-map, March 2019

⁸ Classes where children have been grouped according to their prior attainment and/or perceived ability

own, and so it is the very fact of her failure in the past that was acting as an enablement to her success in the present. Beginning to mirror Archer's description of autonomous reflexivity, she marshals her inner resources and works exceptionally hard to rectify the limitations constructed for her in her SATs results and disrupts their cycle of negative reinforcement. In contrast to most of the other girls in this study, in Freya's case, it is her initial experience of *not* doing well in school that facilitates her future high achievement and accentuates how the active interplay of agency with structure is leading to change in the girls' lives.

5.2.4 Re-adjusting Responses to HE

Corresponding to Archer's (1995, 2003) model of morphogenesis, as they get older and progress through school, the girls are repeatedly exposed to new situations and new experiences that prompt them to re-evaluate old projects in light of new information. It is by responding subjectively to these experiences that the girls both shape their educational trajectories and are shaped by them. An interesting example of this is how Alice, despite describing herself as always having been a high achiever, had not initially wanted to go to university. Like other working-class young people with no family history of HE, the decision to apply to university is not an 'obvious' one (Bathmaker et al., 2016) and arguably lies outside of the girls' 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). It was only when Alice started having physiotherapy for an injury during Year 11 that she began to subjectively reassess her options:

going to the session was fun and so I was like, oo, ok, that looks like really fun, I can see myself doing that and so the more I looked into how to get into the NHS and be a professional in the NHS there was so many things that I can see myself fitting into and I was like, oo! And then, like, I somewhat literally stumbled across medicine, like it was never even an option, I was like oo, I kind of like this and it kind of fits with what I like and what I'm good at (Alice, Interview, July 2019)

Following this experience, she gained a volunteering role at a hospital that helped to confirm her decision to apply to study medicine at university in order, as her future person depicted, to become a doctor (Figure 16). Although this was not part of Alice's original project, like Margaret Archer (2003, p. 253) describes, she was open to the 'supra-contextual' knowledge that she encountered during her initial interactions with these new and unfamiliar medical settings and acted reflexively towards them to redesign her educational future. As Alice readjusts her response to HE and begins to redefine her future career in light of this new knowledge about society and about herself, she reflects Archer's description of an author of a 'transformatory' project (2003, p. 253). As such, she uses the acquisition of further knowledge as an enablement to elasticate her future.



Figure 16: 'Doctor' - Alice, future person, March 2019

Significantly, the dynamic and changing nature of the girls' situations is also having a powerful impact on those around them. In this way, many parents have met the prospect of their daughter's progression to HE with growing engagement and openness over the girls' educational histories. This is evident in Rachel's account of how her parents changed their initial perspectives on university:

It was more my sister that they were like 'we don't want you going'. Like, I don't agree with it but they were like 'we've never been and we're fine' but I think with the change in like culture as well like it's harder to do really well without a degree nowadays, compared to when they were growing up and they've accepted it and, like, the fact there's so many people we know go to university nowadays (Rachel, life-mapping session, May 2018)

Like Rachel's parents, people can review and adjust their perspectives in light of the experiences of others. The change in how many of the girls' families view university is particularly significant as it challenges static assumptions about working-class perceptions of HE. Indeed, while most of the girls' parents start off with little knowledge about HE, there are many examples of their efforts to learn more. This includes engagement with information sessions set up by the school and led by teachers or local university representatives, as well as their own research. For

example, Nat explains how her mum got involved with the university open days she attended:

my mum is so on it with stuff like this. She's very much like a researcher. Like I'll say, 'oh I think I'm going out in a couple of days to this place' and I can see her typing it into google and I'm like 'you don't have to do that for me, I can do that'. And she's like 'just give me a minute' (Nat, interview, August 2019)

There is a stark contrast here between the way in which these working-class families are venturing together into the unknown, in a way that parents from middle and upper social classes arguably do not have to (Bathmaker et al., 2016). It is clear from their accounts that considerable investment was required by the girls' parents to learn more about the workings of universities and the application process alongside their daughters. Yet when they do, these parents' changing knowledge and viewpoints are a powerful enablement that helps to resist cultural continuity for their children. They are thus part of the morphogenetic transformation of the girls' circumstances, which supports their daughters as they continue along very different pathways to what more deterministic accounts of working-class educational engagement might have predicted for them.

Equally powerful in encouraging working-class young peoples' university engagement is arguably also the culture of learning that exists at home. As B. Jackson and Marsden (2012) were writing about half a century ago, parents' learning has an impact on their families and children. In their seminal work, they describe how 'an atmosphere of educational excitement' existed in working-class families where parents had been to grammar school or were themselves engaged in education as adults (p. 73). This is not dissimilar to the impact that Freya's mother's recent graduation with a degree from a Russell Group university (highlighted by Freya in her life-map - Figure 17) has had on Freya's perception of what is possible for herself:

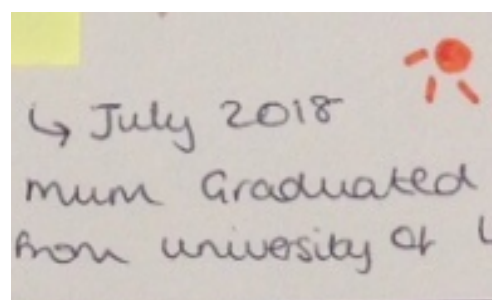


Figure 17: 'Mum's graduation' - Freya, life-map, March 2019.

So that was quite inspirational. It was like, if she can do it while working and also doing that full-time, I can definitely do it as like my only thing (Freya, interview, July 2019)

The remarkable achievement of Freya's mum as mature student juggling university with full-time work and a family offers what Freya later describes as a 'comfort blanket' for her own ambitions (interview, July 2019). Not only is university desirable for Freya but knowing her mum has successfully navigated it before her, it is now also attainable. As the impact of Freya's mum's graduation shows, parental participation in higher education can encourage inter-generational mobility (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010), with parents' own learning opportunities acting as enablements in the educational engagement of their children. With recognition of the morphogenetic ways in which both Freya's and her mother's circumstances are changing, university is shown to be a transformative process for whole families, not just the individual involved.

5.3 Becoming Expert in Structure and Agency

As they start to refine their projects and reposition themselves, the girls are not exempt from the 'conditional influence' that structural conditions pertaining to their social class and gender exert (M. S. Archer, 1995). However, they are becoming increasingly skilled in understanding the workings of society, including the factors that will enable them to achieve their academic aims. Alice, for example, shows awareness of the structural conditions likely to elasticate and constrain the achievement of her new project of becoming a doctor (M. S. Archer, 2003). These exist in the form of the subjects she is already hoping to take for her A-levels, which are essential options that she needs to meet the entry criteria for studying medicine:

I've always loved chemistry and biology so they were like my favourites [...] so it kind of went hand in hand with me wanting to do medicine, that was what you had to do and what I loved (Interview, July 2019)

Since these are subjects that bring medicine into the realm of possibility for Alice, they facilitate the successful elastication of her university intentions (M. S. Archer, 2003). However, it is only in the later stages of their educational journeys that many of the girls realise that the subjects they have chosen are enablements for projects that could 'not even have been conceived without them' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 208). Like for Haley, who draws a heart next to the subject of science in her life-map (Figure 18) and applies to study natural sciences at an elite university, the girls' earlier pathways are usually informed by what they find enjoyable:



Figure 18: 'I just liked the science' - Haley, life-map, May 2018

I didn't know what to do and I've never known what I want to do, I just liked the science. Even at GCSE I wasn't going to do separates⁹, and then I decided I'll do separates. I've always liked chemistry, I think, and maths but I don't know, I like, I just sort of like found my way into it. (Haley, life-mapping session, August 2018)

Although basing their GCSE and A-level choices on the subjects that most appeal to them might be a rather 'hit and miss affair' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 204), for most of the girls it has worked out well. Indeed, in the two-way relationship between structure and agency, factors that typically might contract working-class students' aspirations of studying 'traditional subjects at traditional universities' (Reay et al., 2005, p. 44) have seemingly played a relatively small part.

In a similar way, the girls' future university and occupational projects are also elasticated rather than contracted by the high grades that they achieve across their SATs, GCSEs and are predicted in their A-levels. Despite evidence showing that high-achieving pupils at age 11 are less likely to be high achieving by the end of secondary school if they come from the least advantaged backgrounds (Crawford, Macmillan, et al., 2017), the girls have sustained earlier attainment into sixth form.

⁹ Referring to 'separate sciences', where students study biology, chemistry and physics and achieve a separate GCSE in each, as opposed to studying 'combined sciences' which covers less content in each science and is equivalent to two GCSEs.

Recognising themselves as academically able, many of the students describe how university has always been on the horizon for high achievers like them:

I've kind of always just sort of like saw it like the natural progression of my education, I was like oh yeah I've done my A-levels I'm going to go to university now because I do enjoy learning and school and I just think this is the right thing to do for me definitely (Becky, interview, January 2019)

But from Year 7 to 11 I've always been told that I'm academic and I feel like it's just, dunno, what you do [...] Like I always knew that would go. I used to want to do politics but now I don't but I knew I'd do something academic. (Rachel, life-mapping session, May 2018)

Yet although all the girls knew by at least the time they had reached sixth form that they wanted to go to university, whether their applications would be accepted and whether they would get there were not taken for granted. As working-class students for whom university is 'not part of an inter-generational family history or tradition' (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p. 62), they do not take their academic futures for granted. As Margaret Archer (2007a, p. 202) describes of individuals enacting autonomous reflexivity 'fantasy is a luxury that they cannot afford':

It was GCSE results day when I first thought to myself oh I could go to like Oxford or Cambridge maybe like one day but I was just sort of doing as much as I could, trying my hardest and hoping for the best. (Haley, interview, August 2018)

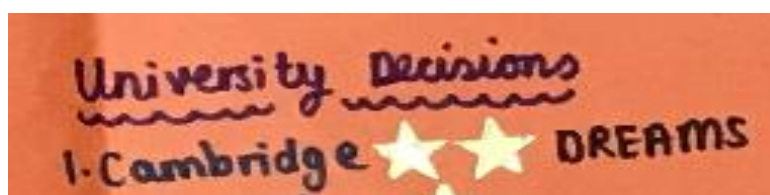


Figure 19: 'University dreams' - Haley, life-map, May 2018

While students like Haley may talk about and depict their futures (Figure 19) in terms of 'making dreams come true' (Reay et al., 2009), this portrayal of their goals reveals uncertainties about obtaining them. University is something they work for and hope for but regardless of the 'skill and will' they invest in getting there (Devlin, 2013), it is rarely an entitlement. In stark contrast to the certainty of their middle-class peers

(Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013), as 'realistic' young people who are developing in their autonomous reflexivity, the girls are learning to navigate their educational pathways by monitoring their actual circumstances closely (M. S. Archer, 2007a). This means they are very aware that 'official' indicators of smartness, in the form of grades and academic subjects, offer wide degrees of freedom for their futures (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020; Skelton & Francis, 2005). Yet they are also aware that they must traverse a 'goodly quota of unforeseeable contingencies over which they have no control' to make their projects concrete (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 202). Enablements do not exist without the concomitants of constraints.

5.3.1 Developing Self-Awareness

Learning to circumvent obstacles while capitalising on opportunities requires a high degree of self-awareness that some of the girls demonstrate more successfully than others at different points in their educational trajectories. As Margaret Archer (2007a) argues, both opportunities and obstacles need to be taken into account reflexively in relation to one another. When they are not, those who are 'riveted' on opportunities alone may be oblivious to circumstances that threaten to jeopardise their projects (p. 217). This is a difficult lesson that some of the girls learn early on in their education as they actively engage with a vast array of practical activities, such as the football, music and reading that Tegan



Figure 20: 'Practical activities' - Tegan, life-map, March 2019

illustrated in her life-map (Figure 20). These enabled the girls to differentiate themselves from their original close circles of acquaintances and gave them freedom to develop reflexive activities autonomously (M. S. Archer, 2003). Yet as some of the girls lavish time and effort on a range of extra-curricular pursuits, these begin to interfere with their academic projects:

I was so overwhelmed I suppose, because I was training for like three hours a day, seven days a week. And then I did my dance on top and I was just like, ok, it needs to stop until I regroup myself and rope myself back into a better place. (Amelia, interview, August 2018)

It got to the point where I felt like I was doing too much. Like I'm not even getting a weekend off to just like go the library or like that. (Tegan, interview, September 2019).

It is only when these activities begin to take a toll on the girls' physical and mental well-being that they recognise them as potential barriers to their other academic aims. As Tegan articulates 'school was more important' (interview, September 2019). As they become aware of their own limits, the girls are learning to act more strategically in prioritising their academic interests. They cannot be expected to become 'master strategists' in all situations, but they are learning to approach their educational futures in a strategic manner typical of autonomous reflexivity (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 214). Consequently, many of their earlier extra-curricular activities cease to be considered purposeful courses of action in advancing their academic projects and are either dropped or become a secondary personal concern.

In contrast to the students whose primary focus is on the opportunities available to them, there are others who at certain points in their educational trajectories risk forfeiting these opportunities due to their focus on obstacles. As Margaret Archer (2007a) describes, this has the potential to limit their eventual outcomes. In this way, despite the urging of a teacher to consider becoming a vet and the high attainment that could get her there, Neala's cautious self-monitoring acts as a potential obstacle to this. Her focus during the early stages of her secondary education is on becoming a veterinary nurse:

I didn't really feel I could be a vet, you know at the time I didn't really feel like I had great leadership skills or I'd be able to, you know, you know, come up with a solution to like a diagnosis or whatever, so I thought ok maybe not, maybe like a vet nurse. Obviously the salary's a lot lower, you don't really have that many responsibilities within the clinic but I thought, you know, I won't be able to go for a vet so this is my second best option. (Neala, interview, January 2019)

Having discovered a personal interest in working with animals when her family adopted a dog, Neala's project is a careful balance of pursuing something she finds subjectively attractive with circumventing the perceived constraint of her confidence. Her decision-making is therefore about more than just the matching of her

qualifications or attainment to opportunities (Ball et al., 2002; Campbell et al., 2019). Experiencing the structural constraints of social class, she treads carefully in her future planning and with a greater degree of risk than might be experienced by her 'protected' middle-class peers for whom university is a normalised part of their futures (L. Archer & Hutchings, 2000). Although she changes her decision later in secondary school, Neala undertakes little active planning for becoming a vet until sixth form and this makes finding the significant amounts of work experience required for entry to veterinary sciences particularly challenging.

While Neala's cautious approach to pursuing her personal interest in working with animals had the potential to restrict the opportunities that were open to her, it is uncertainty about what to study or what to go into after university that is doing the same for some of the other girls. These obstacles 'are not necessarily like boulders in someone's pathway' but can nonetheless gradually erode people's projects (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 147). To this end, it is Mollie's non-decision making that threatens to contract her university goals:

It's like a burden sometimes because some people have everything planned out and then I feel bad. Like my mum will be like, 'oh what do you want to do with your life?' and I don't know. It's a bit, it's just annoying sometimes that I don't have a clear step so then I might miss something that's, like, really important in my life and I could never know coz I was uncertain about it. (Mollie, interview, January 2019)

Mollie is aware that in delaying her decision she could be forfeiting other opportunities available to her. Yet going to university for her own personal satisfaction does not seem to be enough. Despite post-feminist assumptions that these high-achieving girls can do and be anything they anything they want (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017), like the working-class girls in Evans's (2009) research who anticipate that university for its own sake may be seen by others as a 'selfish pursuit', the girls were eager to have a plan for what HE would lead to afterwards. In this way, translating an intrinsic interest in learning into an extrinsic educational and professional pathway was often extremely difficult, as Freya

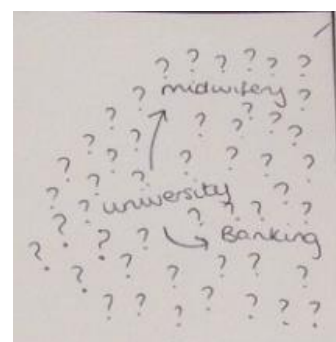


Figure 21: 'Existential crisis' - Freya, life-map, March 2019

portrays in her life-map through question marks surrounding her two different career options (Figure 21). Indeed, described by Freya as an ‘existential crisis’ about her future options (life-mapping session, March 2019), the potential that this uncertainty has to limit their eventual outcomes often causes the girls considerable concern.

5.3.2 Active Knowledge Used Strategically

As they delineate each next stage of their educational trajectories, what the girls are learning about the structural conditions that will elasticate or contract their intended projects is not passive knowledge, but is ‘strategic information, which they use’ (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 253). Despite times when they focus too much on opportunities rather than obstacles, or vice versa, there are many ways in which the girls take them into account reflexively in conjunction with one another to move forward with their plans. Indeed, reflecting their developing autonomous reflexivity, this helps them to plan courses of action on the basis of ‘searching for opportunities’ at the same time as ‘anticipating and circumventing obstacles’ (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 215). This is evident, for example, in how Freya approaches the effects of her ‘bad’ Year 6 SATs results (see section 5.2.3), which mean she is in the bottom set for everything and predicted low GCSE target grades. The sense of indignation Freya feels about how this constrains her education is clear:

SATs are a bit cruel, like to do them at such a young age and put so much pressure on them and then how much that affects the rest of your time in secondary school (Interview, July 2019).

Although the context in which the girls are beginning their education is still one where assessment results are conflated with future prospects (Reay, 2017; Reay & Wiliam, 1999), Freya has noted in her life-map the ‘silver lining’ (Figure 22) that she has found in her low predicted grades. Using this, she takes a strategic stance to circumvent them as a potential constraint and invest in her learning with ‘nothing to lose’ (Interview, July 2019). By enacting her target grades as a safe space to respond deliberately to the situation she finds herself in, she is able

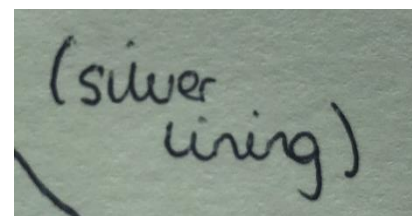


Figure 22: ‘Silver lining’ - Freya, life-map, March 2019

to harness their constraining and enabling powers 'to [her] own agential aims' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 253). Ultimately, as Freya describes, she was 'never expected to get what I got' in her final GCSE exams (Interview, July 2019).

In a similar way, as Nat starts to plan for the next stage in her educational trajectory during Year 12, she is forced to weigh up the costs and benefits of two very different subjects to decide what she will study at university. As she illustrates in her life-map (Figure 23) and explains in her interview, she is incredibly passionate about dance and having studied it throughout high school and sixth form, the opportunity is there for her to apply for. Yet as she explains the phrase 'decisions.... decisions' that is noted in her life-map (Figure 24), it is clear that she is torn:



Figure 23: 'Passionate about dance' - Nat, life-map, March 2019

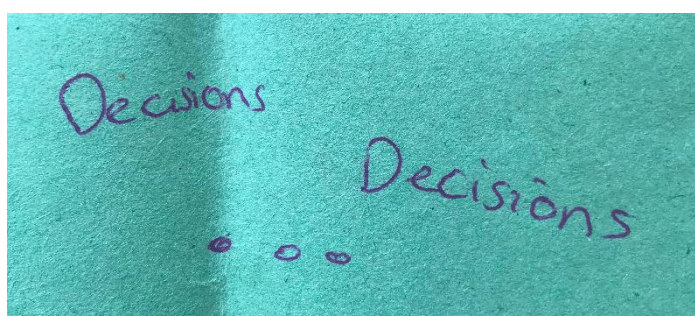


Figure 24: 'University decisions' - Nat, life-map, March 2019

If uni was free I would whole heartedly go in and be like 'I'm doing this, I don't care, I'm doing this!'. But because it's such a big decision and because I'm good at other things, more like academic things, I think, 'is it worth going to uni and doing dance when I don't know what I want to do with dance in the future?' but I know I really enjoy studying dance, do you know what I mean? (Nat, interview, August 2019)

In some ways, with the breadth of subjects and strong grades that she is predicted at A-level, she could be described as having high degrees of freedom to plan her long-term future in either dance or economics. Indeed, as Margaret Archer (2007a, p. 220) might suggest, both routes have the potential to lead towards the upward

mobility that ‘the autonomous reflexives favour’. However, Nat was clearly torn between pursuing a subject she enjoys and one she considers may be a more strategic investment for her future. Keeping a ‘careful weather eye’ on both obstacles and opportunities (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 215), her final decision is strategically based rather than concerned with the maximisation of her personal preferences. While Nat may have high degrees of freedom academically, financial considerations play an important part in this decision. She anticipates more enablements in economics compared to dance and is prepared to capitalise on the advantages that it offers for her future.

5.3.3 Non-negotiable Constraints

While the girls are learning to capitalise on enablements and circumvent obstacles, their strategies are not always successful and there are times when structural factors cannot be overcome. It is in these moments that the constraining influence of social class and gender are particularly clear in the lives of the girls as they seek to fulfil their academic goals. So, while many of the girls appear to readily seize opportunities and seem successful at whatever they do, there are also instances in which their agency is affected by circumstances outside of their control. For example, although several of the girls break with traditional gendered patterns of subject choice by studying sciences at A-level (Cavaglia et al., 2021), Gaby’s engagement with physics was affected by her interaction with a teacher during the first few weeks of the course:

There was me and there was another girl, who was quite like a tomboy, and the rest were boys and so I was the only one who was like kind of like a girly girl kind of thing. And so [the teacher] kind of like picked on me for that and it was very much like he’d come up to me and be like ‘are you sure you’re ok?’ like ‘you seem a bit confused’ and he didn’t do that for the others. He was like they’re fine. He picked on me. So after that I was like I’m not doing that anymore, so I dropped it. (Gaby, interview, November 2018)

By choosing physics as an A-level option in the first instance, Gaby has already overcome stark differences between subjects that are constructed as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (L. Archer et al., 2019; Skelton & Francis, 2005). Indeed, there are

four times as many boys than girls who study physics at A-level (Curnock Cook, 2020), so in starting this course she is already developing autonomous reflexivity in ways that mean she is not afraid to assert her differences. However, as Archer (2007a) advises, not everyone responds to circumstances in the same way, and while some girls may have resisted the teacher's expectations in pursuit of this qualification, Gaby asserts herself against this and leaves the course:

I really love physics like that was my favourite science, um and I was, like I was gutted when I like dropped it but I was like I couldn't have stayed in that class for two years, it just wouldn't have done it. (Gaby, interview, November 2018)

Underpinning the growing individualism of her developing autonomous reflexivity is certainty in her own standards (M. S. Archer, 2007a), which provides the conditions in which she is not afraid to distance herself from what she considers to be unacceptable gendered expectations of her potential. Gaby is still pursuing her goal of university, having replaced physics with an A-level in law, and refuses to let the constructions of gender in her teacher's interactions with her be damaging to this. Nevertheless, the experience is a lesson in what she can bypass and what she finds non-negotiable in her journey to HE.

5.3.4 Selective Subordination

As others have found, the desire to fit in and belong at university influences the girls' institutional decision making (L. Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Reay et al., 2001), yet it is not leading to the familiar patterns of 'class aversion' from high-tariff universities presented elsewhere in the literature (Crawford, Dearden, et al., 2017). Instead, the girls in this study show a strong sense of agency in planning strategically for academic futures that are not only going to be satisfying but will also be sustainable during their time at university. This results in the 'selective subordination' of certain aspects of their original goals (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 222) but does not

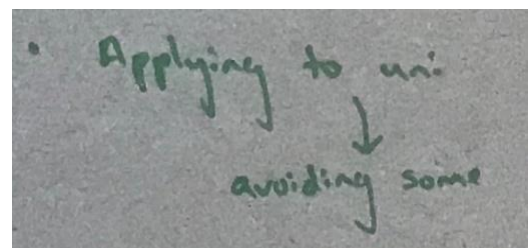


Figure 25: 'Applying to uni, avoiding some' - Estella, life-map, October 2018

mean that they avoid high-tariff providers entirely. Explaining the process of application and avoidance noted in her life-map (Figure 25), Estella, for example, ruled out the prestigious university where she was initially set on studying medicine when she took a closer look at its marketing materials:

I ordered a prospectus because I really wanted to go there but then as I flicked through the prospectus there wasn't anything about diversity. And all the pictures weren't like diverse people (Estella, Interview, February 2019)

With 'personal clarity' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 221) about her non-academic concerns, she is loath to apply for a university that does not give visibility to Asian students like her. Showing a 'keen awareness of issues around cultural mix' (Reay et al., 2001), she concludes that 'after going through like the prospectus it just like doesn't seem that right for me' (Interview, February 2019). In what M. S. Archer (2007a, p. 224) describes as an act of 'self-defence', rather than risk jeopardising her future academic participation and achievement in an institutional culture that places non-white students as 'other', Estella decides to apply to study medicine elsewhere. It is a decision that is shaped by more than Estella feeling a sense of inclusion or exclusion from HE, but also an alignment with what is fair for students who are applying from an unequal starting point. She thus demonstrates a strong sense of agency in her interactions with structural enablements by taking some, not all, of what her high grades and work experience make available to her. By doing so, she is reflexively constraining her university options in the present to be able to elasticate her future success.

In a similar way, the girls are often alert to the ways in which structural inequalities relating to social class can position working-class students as 'outsiders' in HE (L. Archer & Hutchings, 2000). Their decisions are a careful balance between achieving their goals of studying prestigious subjects at high-tariff universities whilst anticipating the social conditions that will facilitate or impede their academic success and well-being when they get there. In this way, while Becky's sights were set on applying to an elite institution and she was predicted the high A-level grades she would need for entry, she felt little right to belong in the social and academic environment she experienced when she went to visit:

There's a big stereotype about what the people are like there and it was true. And I was really feeling it. They were just not really very friendly welcoming people and it was like 'we're [university name] and we're all prestige and you're not like good enough for us' and I was like eek oh dear so I just didn't really like enjoy it I felt kind of out of place and not really welcome. So I was like if I'm not going to be happy there then why bother kind of thing. (Becky, life-mapping session, November 2018)

As Becky's account demonstrates, there is a sense of recognition among the girls that not all the HE institutions available to them are places where their well-being and happiness can be assured. This is reflective of what Reay et al. (2001, p. 863) describe as the 'emotional constraints of choice' that shift according to ethnicity, social class and gender and cause applicants to discount certain universities as they consider the risks of not fitting in.

Yet discounting the elite institution is not a passive response by Becky to her experience of social exclusion. Using her developing reflexivity, Becky is able to deliberate what she learned in the context of her visit and uses this to envisage her future there. In doing so, she enacts agency in her decision making as a way of protecting her plans from an institution that threatens to encroach on the intrinsic satisfaction she wants to gain from her future studies. Like Estella, ultimately her decision making is not about either exclusion or inclusion from high-tariff HEIs but is seemingly more about aligning herself with those she envisages will treat working-class students, who are already disadvantaged in the education system, fairly. To this end, Becky has selected five other high-tariff institutions as options in her UCAS application. Enacting Margaret Archer's description of autonomous reflexivity, both Becky and Estella are learning to set their own boundaries in their pursuit of university and recognise that to go beyond a certain point in their decision making may be damaging to their future concerns (M. S. Archer, 2007a).

5.3.5 Prioritising Academic Acceptance

Although the girls are calling into question many of the exclusionary practices of high-tariff institutions, they are also alert to the sense of inclusion these institutions offer for them as successful academic learners. This is an important enabler in their

motivation to apply, and in contrast to the structural constraints discussed above, may assist their success if they get there. Their decisions stand out from those of their families and the majority of their working-class peers and make clear their 'desire to be different' (M. S. Archer, 2003). Yet their focus on applying to study traditional subjects at high-tariff institutions also signals their search for spaces that will enable their academic dispositions to be recognised and to align with those of the people around them. This comes through clearly in Nat's account, as she describes how what she is looking forward to most at university is 'meeting people like me' (Interview, August 2019):

What's important with me is to be nerdy with them but not competitive with them. Like not feel threatened speaking about stuff and, I dunno, like finding that them people I'm excited for, um, coz say in economics, my classes, there's not really that many people that are. People enjoy it and people are good at it, but there are not many, especially like girls, that are like enthused about it like I am. (Nat, interview, August 2019)

Being a girl who is 'nerdy' about economics sets Nat apart from her peers in sixth form, and reflects the social cost associated with being a smart girl in school (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Renold & Allan, 2006). While she has successfully navigated this difference to the point of applying to university, both gender and academic acceptance are factors that are being accommodated into her university plans. Like the students in Reay et al.'s (2009, p. 1115) study who were mocked for working hard during secondary school but found 'the comforts of academic acceptance and compliance' in elite HE, university offers Nat the possibility of experiencing a greater sense of fitting in as an academic learner.

To further elasticate their sense of inclusion in HE, many of the girls are also intent on finding the right subject and course 'fit' for their university studies. They are thus actively searching for opportunities that align with their current interests and this strongly informs the institutional decisions they make in their applications. Haley, for example, had been searching for a course where she could pursue her broad interest in science and illustrated in her interview and life-map (Figure 26) her enthusiasm for the options that she found:

like natural sciences at Cambridge just fits me so well because I can just try everything and after my first year of doing that I can do chemical engineering so I still get to do a bit of science before I do the engineering. (Haley, interview, August 2018)



Figure 26: 'Chemical Engineering' - Haley, life-map, May 2018

In prioritising their academic interests over other aspects of university life, the girls' decisions are not unlike those of Margaret Archer's (2007a) autonomous reflexives who hold work as their chief concern. However, while they invest significant amounts of time, thought and effort into making the right academic decision this does not mean that they are entirely dismissive of social considerations, as earlier accounts have shown. Instead, they are using their reflexive ability to deliberate academic opportunities and structural obstacles in conjunction with each other to outline sustainable courses of action for their futures (M. S. Archer, 2007a). So while Reay et al. (2009, p. 1115) describe some high-achieving, working-class students in elite HE as 'fitting in as learners despite their class difference', it is notable that Haley is taking strategic action in searching for opportunities in elite HE where she will fit in *because of it*.

In this way, the girls' decisions to apply to high-tariff universities should not be conflated with a project in becoming middle class (Lehmann, 2014). For Haley, her decision making involves careful consideration of the social make-up of the college she has been allocated to at the elite university where she had been accepted to study:

the college that I'm in is actually a really friendly college, it's known as being really inclusive with lots of state school students. So I like that about it. It's not too like posh, not posh, but like I don't know what the word [...] it's more like

normal I suppose, more like what state school students probably need, ah not even need, I don't know what I'm saying but definitely more friendly is good. I think with my parents not going to university and not knowing like, I don't know, I'm definitely glad I've got a larger more inclusive college (Haley, interview, August 2018)

Haley approaches her academic future in a strategic manner with an awareness of the social conditions that will accommodate her working-class background, as well as the academic conditions that are likely to enable success and inclusion in her future studies. Reflecting Crozier et al.'s (2019, p. 934) more recent analysis of the working-class students from their earlier study (Reay et al., 2009), Haley shows a determination to succeed that does not involve 'capitulating to the dominant norm'. Intent on studying a specific course at this particular provider, she is hopeful that she has found a way to outmanoeuvre social class obstacles and simultaneously protect her academic concerns. As an active agent in her own decision making, she is planning strategically for her future.

5.4 Autonomously Deliberating Individualism

In many ways, the girls' developing autonomous reflexivity could be presented as evidence of the success of social mobility and meritocracy in the education system. Embodying the ethos of neoliberalism, they have shown great deals of individualism and commitment to achieving their academic goals and with a future-oriented approach to their studies 'they work hard and get the job done' (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 17). However, as their interactions with enablements and constraints so far in this chapter have shown, they are not 'oblivious to the circumstances that threaten to jeopardise their projects' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 215). The neoliberal logic that success is a matter of individual choice and effort has therefore been a source of personal tension and unease for some of the girls who know that only a small number of their peers succeed academically. For Estella, this becomes apparent through the high-achievers programme that she is part of in school:

There's this thing called the [high-achievers programme] that one of my teachers set up. And I don't know how I feel about it, because it's good that I'm in it because I have lots of opportunities to do things, like go on taster

days, go to talks and stuff, because that's meant to be for the like top few percent in that school. But I don't feel very good about it because like a lot of my friends didn't get to go in it (Interview, February 2019)

While schemes such as this are intended to provide the students who are selected for them with recognition and development of their academic credentials (Skelton & Francis, 2005), Estella is becoming increasingly aware that being part of a selective scheme relies on there being others who are not. Realising that she experiences its structural powers differently to those outside of it, feels particularly unjust for Estella, who observes how it simultaneously enables her own project of becoming a doctor whilst contracting the opportunities of friends who have similar career ambitions. As her statement shows, this creates contradictory conditions for the students selected for these programmes as they find the opportunities subjectively attractive but struggle to deal with the objective environment that they confront in practice. In the narrative of neoliberalism, they have been taught to believe that they can succeed at anything they put their minds to and through the realities of their lives in school realise that few of them actually do. So while Estella is able to use the opportunity as a 'springboard' to doing things that she might never otherwise get to do (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 228), this is not undertaken without significant personal confliction.

The neoliberal context in which these schemes operate means that when provided with opportunities, the high-achieving students who participate are expected to succeed (Reay, 2017). In other words, if an individual seizes the enablements on offer and believes enough in themselves, the implication is that they can do what they want to. Alongside their developing autonomous reflexivity, this validates their strong drive towards achieving their university goals and succeeding on their own terms. While they are aware of the 'differentially advantageous places' from which they start their education compared to their middle and upper class counterparts (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 54), many of the girls describe how these potential constraints were mitigated by other opportunities their backgrounds had afforded them. To this end, several of the girls describe their disadvantage in positive terms in relation to the summer schools and university access schemes they took part in:

in a way I'm quite lucky that I'm poor, if that makes sense. Even though that's only like come into effect now like I'm in college and like there's more opportunities. (Gaby, interview, November 2018).

being on a lower income family is not a hindrance to your education because there is so many opportunities as long as you do well in school and you excel in school and you're determined to do well (Giulianna, interview, August 2019)

Under the mirage of meritocracy these schemes act as structural enablements that invite students to invest in the notion of individual social mobility and seem to hand them 'the fulfilment of [their] new dreams on a platter' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 212). This means that the girls assume significant personal responsibility for making the most of them. As Giulianna explains:

This year I haven't had time to go on a summer holiday, I was like, so every time I come back home on a Saturday and I would have on the Monday, I would have to hop off again, going to a different university for a whole week again, 'bye mum, bye dad'. It was every single week I had somewhere to go (Giulianna, interview, August 2019)

Through their exceptionally busy schedules, they capitalise on the opportunities that

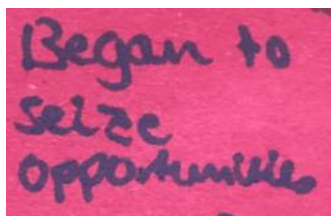


Figure 27: 'Seizing opportunities' - Becky, life-map, November 2018

are available to them during sixth form as they begin to make important decisions about their futures. As Becky's life-map illustrates, there is a prominent focus in their accounts on their ability to 'seize opportunities' available to them (Figure 27). In what can be described as a 'something for something' social model (Skelton & Francis, 2005), they are thus striving to meet the expectations set for them in programmes built specifically for them and try to translate this into their future achievement. Accepting of the

'meritocratic myth' (Reay, 2017), their experiences suggests that the girls can beat the odds to succeed, and their success is made legitimate by the 'skill and will' that has gone into it (Devlin, 2013).

5.4.1 The 'Myth' of Meritocracy

In this ideological context, the implication for the girls of having access to apparently equal opportunities is that many of them consider any setbacks or struggles in their educational trajectories to be of their own making. While Margaret Archer (2007a, p. 195) is very clear that people can never be 'master strategists' in their interactions with constraints and enablements, under the myth of meritocracy some of girls misrecognise their personal powers as agents. As Mollie explains quite simply:

I know that if I work hard then I'll do really good and then if I don't work hard then I don't. (Mollie, interview, January 2019)

As her statement suggests, meritocracy emphasises the role of the individual agent in their own social mobility. Yet, at the same time, it also instils the idea that failure is the fault of the individual who does not have enough neoliberal drive to succeed. So, while they attempt to take advantage of enablements, the girls also assume responsibility for how far these take them. This is a narrative that conceals the many other ways in which failure can be brought about in the education system through structural and social constraints that attach 'different opportunity costs' to the same courses of action (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 18). In particular, it fixes failure among working-class students, and draws attention away from the structural injustices that mean they are typically less likely to attain the high grades and university places considered to be the 'norm' for their middle-class counterparts. The consequence is that low achievement among working-class students may be interpreted as 'pathological', and the causal factors of educational failure rooted solely in the individual (Reay, 2001a).

Since they can only circumvent obstacles 'in so far as they are aware of them' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 295), the journey to university is inevitably risky and scary for high-achieving, working-class students. This is reflected in the way Haley depicts an interview at the University of Cambridge in her life-map (Figure 28). Within this narrative the girls only have themselves to blame if they

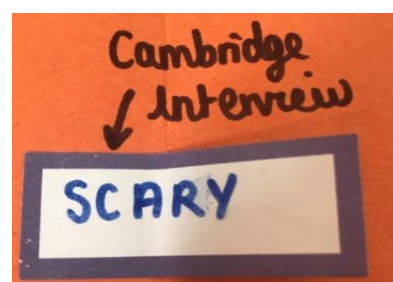


Figure 28: 'Scary' - Haley, life-map, May 2018

do not get there. It is no surprise therefore that they express strong emotions and deep anxieties about their potential for academic failure:

It was just the pressure I put on myself that made everything worse because like, uh I don't know, coz I did perform really well in high school and stuff and then I just thought if I don't get these really good grades, I thought, what's the point? (Mollie, interview, January 2019)

And I remember [...] the exams I thought I'd done the worst on. Like chemistry, I came out of the exam sobbing like to the point that the nurse had to send me home because I was absolutely inconsolable, hysterical, like I thought I'd just ruined my life. So I got sent home. (Amelia, life-mapping session, March 2019)

As these examples clearly demonstrate, the risk of exposing their own personal deficiencies by not doing well placed the girls under enormous amounts of pressure and engaged them in a 'constant struggle of self-management and self-improvement' (Tiainen, Leiviskä, & Brunila, 2019, p. 642). This sometimes impacted on their health or well-being, yet they continued to invest heavily in the neoliberal ethos of 'hard work' to guard against failure. Becky's notes in her life-map on working 'super hard' for her GCSEs were

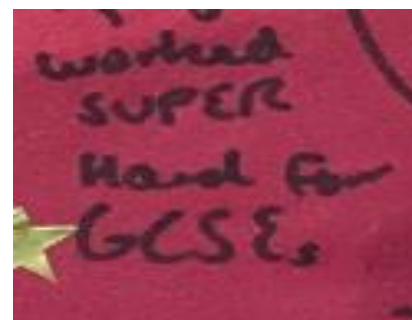


Figure 29: 'Worked super hard for GCSEs' - Becky, life-map, November 2018

not unique (Figure 29). Consequently, although Archer argues that cultural properties, such as neoliberal ideology, 'have first to be found good by a person before they can influence the projects she entertains' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 17), the girls' accounts show how people may also be influenced by cultural properties that they do not find good. Indeed, in this instance, the girls are affectively attached to goals that may ultimately harm their well-being. Yet despite the ways in which the threat of educational failure takes an emotional toll on the girls and constrains their mental well-being, the risk of this label becoming deeply personal is a powerful enablement in sustaining their drive for educational success.

5.4.2 The 'Myth' of the Meritocratic Smart Girl

The simultaneously constraining and enabling effects of the girls' actions to guard against failure are not only tied up with social class but are also influenced by their gender. As Pomerantz and Raby (2017, p. 50) argue, there is a heavy burden on these female students to invest in the 'meritocratic smart girl stereotype', which perpetuates the idea that by making the 'right' choices and working hard girls can be who they want to be. As discussed in Chapter 2, neoliberal and post-feminist views come together to position girls as 'exciting figures of assumed feminist success and neo-liberal drive' who can do so much with so much ease (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 38). Yet the specific pressures that the 'successful girls' discourse (Ringrose, 2007) places on the girls in this study to always need to do more and do it better to stay on top mean that only excellence will act as enough of an insurance to guard against failure. Therefore, while the girls' performance is noteworthy, for the individual students it is often 'never enough'. Nat, for example, berated herself for the one subject in which she received a GCSE grade lower than what she was predicted:

everybody was just like celebrating and I was there like 'uh'. And it's so frustrating because I don't know why I do this to myself but, coz I should be like, 'oh it doesn't matter, look at the 90% good stuff' but I just pick out the one thing and I can't deal with it. (Nat, interview, August 2019)

Nat's reaction demonstrates the lived realities of the 'smart girl' stereotype. In its drive for perfection, it is both elasticating the students' high attainment whilst also contracting their ability to recognise this through the 'self-surveillant, hypercritical attitudes' that they present in relation to their school work (Reay, 2001b, p. 158).

Yet Nat is 'reflexively aware' of how she often misrecognises the notability of her performance (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Like for many of the girls, she knows there is a gap between how she often takes things to be and how they actually are. Notably, she is also beginning to think about the simultaneously constraining and enabling effects of social class and gender that surround this:

I think, probably from certain places you get that graft more, I think, like, I've always felt like I need to graft. Not even just because of class but I think because I'm a girl. And I know that, coz, I've never even felt that I've been discriminated or anything that serious but I think sometimes when boys are annoying and cocky, especially in like classes like maths especially, because a lot of lads in that class are so smart and that's what kind of gives me the drive as well coz I'm like uh I need to get on with it, you know what I mean? Be that dark horse. (Nat, interview, August 2019)

Nat's drive to be a 'dark horse', someone who is not expected to do well and unexpectedly succeeds, presents a strong metaphor for the experiences of the high-achieving, working-class girls in this study. They are grafting exceptionally hard to progress in an education system where girls are assumed to be thriving in their studies and professional ambitions, but where for working-class students 'failure looms large and success is elusive' (Reay, 2006, p. 301). As neoliberal subjects, caught in the double bind of gender and class, at the same time as they strive for academic perfection, they are also trying to prove themselves worthy of it. In contrast to the post-feminist image of young women 'having it all', these working-class girls find themselves pincered between the powerfully enabling and constraining effects of their personal characteristics alongside their academic success.

5.4.3 The Cruel Optimism of Social Mobility

Therefore, although the girls are certainly excelling in their education, it should not be assumed that their developing autonomous reflexivity means they are an 'ideal type' of student who can shape their futures as they please because of the opportunities available to them. Although applicants to HE are often positioned as making individualised and rational choices about HE, as Margaret Archer (2007a, p. 214) argues, 'subjects should not be expected to be master strategists, if only because of their imperfect information and human fallibility'. People can make mistakes in pursuit of their goals or they can be discouraged by encounters with structural constraints. For instance, Gaby, like many of the girls, seized the opportunity to attend a university summer school at the end of Year 12 and spent a week living and studying at an elite provider. At first, this elasticated her university

aspirations and, having never considered applying to Oxbridge in the past, she explains how:

it was really good to try that and it was a really nice week and I came away from there thinking oh I'm going to apply for Cambridge! (Gaby, interview, November 2018)

Yet the question marks surrounding her depiction of this experience in her life-map (Figure 30), reflect how her plans to apply were knocked back down on her return to school after sharing them with a teacher who suggests that Gaby will struggle to get in.

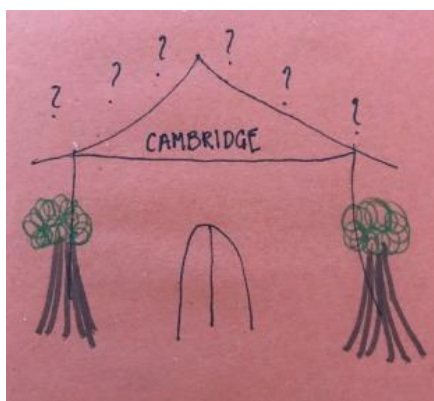


Figure 30: 'Elite university?' - Gaby, life-map, November 2018

I was like, I think I might apply now, and she went 'oh that's good' and she went 'what did you get at GCSE?' and I was like, I told her what the grades I got and she went 'coz I mean if it comes down to it they're going to go for someone who's got seven A*s over you' and I was like 'oh actually when I was there I was talking to them and they, like the lady who does admissions she said that unlike Oxford like they go off GCSEs a lot less' and she was like 'but still they're going to go for something with better GCSEs' and after that I literally walked out. I was like crying when I got home (Interview, November 2018)

After this encounter, Gaby's aspirations lose their elasticity enough that she prematurely excludes herself from applying. There is a heavy sense in her response of what Berlant (2010) describes as the 'cruel optimism' of social mobility, which builds up hopes and desires about elite HE that come tumbling down even as Gaby seeks to climb up. As Reay (2018a, p. 156) argues, for working-class students, 'longing for something different and then striving to make this happen constitutes an

emotionally and socially terrifying shift away from the safe and familiar'. As much as they are searching for opportunities, against the backdrop of discourses of working-class failure, they are also pre-empting their demise. It only takes the 'imperfect information' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 215) of one teacher to reaffirm the inauthenticity of Gaby's aspiration and cause her to curtail her new goal. Gaby's reaction is thus more than just a matter of individual choice. It shows that although enablements may widen the university options to which the girls aspire, the parameters of these aspirations are not unconstrained.

5.5 Reflexively Reframing HE Aspirations

The neoliberal emphasis on young people as being accountable for their own educational and economic success, means that there is a strong weight placed on the girls in this study to make 'good choices' for their own future benefit (Davies, 2012). To this end, many of the girls are formulating their university projects strategically, around degrees and careers that will enhance their personal prospects. Through the images in their life-maps (for example, Figure 31 and Figure 32) and during their interviews, they cite travel, money for their future lifestyles and job



Figure 31: 'Life Aims' - Freya, life-map, March 2019



Figure 32: 'Independence' - Rosie, life-map, May 2018

satisfaction among their motivations for gaining a degree and have ambitious personal agendas to materially improve their futures.

Reflecting these ambitions, Gaby explains her own reasons for applying to study Law through her life-map (Figure 33) and interview:



So like, obviously in my future like I want things, so like that I have a lot of money which I didn't really have growing up and like to travel. I think I want to travel more than most people because I never had a chance to travel. That kind of thing. (Gaby, interview, November 2018)

Figure 33: 'I want to travel more than most' - Gaby, life-map, November 2018

In very different ways to working-class girls in other studies, who direct potential earnings towards existing families rather than towards themselves as the only beneficiaries (S. Evans, 2009), these girls often demonstrate an autonomous drive to attend university for their own personal advantage. They could be described as 'active consumers' within the 'educational market' of HE (Brooks, 2013) who seize on enablements and circumvent constraints in their journeys to university in ways that are intended to leave them 'better off' (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Yet although the current HE system is set up to attract aspirational applicants such as these young women, individual gain is not the only reason why the girls are applying to study in HE. To offer a comprehensive account of the girls' interactions with enablements and constraints, it is thus important to incorporate into this analysis the other priorities that are informing their proposed applications to university.

5.5.1 Meta-Reflexivity: Value-orientated Aspirations

All the girls have similar goals to attain high-grades and progress to high-tariff universities and professional careers. However, as has already been demonstrated, their entry to HE is not framed around 'liberation' from their social contexts (Bovill, 2012). Rather than conflating the value of HE with social mobility, many of the girls

are making decisions around a broader understanding of its social goods. For example, in Amelia's case, her pursuit of HE is a means of investing in a cause she feels strongly about, namely the caring responsibility she has at home and her personal experience of living with a chronic illness. These provide the impetus for Amelia to develop her own values around 'making a difference' to the lives of others (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 264) and underpin the pursuit of a career in medicine that she illustrates through the stethoscope in her future person (Figure 34) and explains in her interview:

I don't want to go into medicine for the money, I just want to do it because I like to help people and I feel like because I've gone through so many periods when I've just felt so useless that I just want to feel like I can offer something. (Amelia, interview, August 2019)



Akin to Margaret Archer's (2003, 2007a) description of 'meta-reflexivity', Amelia seeks a vocation where her values of serving others can be fulfilled. She recognises that in order to facilitate this, she needs to engage with people outside her immediate social circles. Hence Amelia is already looking forward to the self-knowledge that she will gain from interacting with new contacts at university, not only for her own self-betterment but as further investment in this cause:

Figure 34: 'Career in medicine' - Amelia, life-map, March 2019

It's always nice to be around different types of people I think, and you can offer so much to someone else and they can offer [...] pieces that you don't even realise that you're missing. And then they just give you different outlooks and I like the information that everyone's got a different point of view, I suppose. (Amelia, interview, August 2019)

Amelia is not autonomously pursuing a degree in medicine in order to 'seek her fortune' (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Her dreams are shaped by values that entail serving others over herself, and it is clear that her experience at home has acted as a strong enablement in how she is making decisions and embarking on plans for her future.

Yet as Archer (2003) argues, factors outside of a meta-reflexive's control can readily destroy the alignment of their concerns with their ideal. Reflecting this, at the same time as Amelia's family life is driving her motivation to attain high-grades and pursue a career in medicine, it is also threatening to destabilise her investment in these aims by constraining the future options available to her. As she explains:

I have a lot of responsibilities at home definitely, so that's one of the things that has been influencing my choice of university, because I have, I do play a massive role in the household of sort of looking after everyone (Amelia, interview, August 2019)

At this point in her trajectory, these constraints do not 'overshadow' or cause her to 're-route' her plans to study medicine entirely (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 239). Yet Amelia is willing to forfeit the potentially enabling offers to study medicine that she may receive from universities outside her local region because she would not be able to continue in her caring role at home. Geographically constrained by her responsibilities to family, she is fortunate that she lives in an area of the country that gives her access to a medical school. Yet by pinning her hopes to this single, local institution, she is also acting in 'narrow circumscribed spaces of choice' (Reay et al., 2005, p. 85) and may struggle to live out her ideals whilst dovetailing them with her family obligations. With a conceptualisation of university as being about more than upward mobility, she thus acts subversively and constrains her options rather than pursue a more individualistic strategy to access HE.

Reframing students' university aspirations through an alternative value system, also presents alternative ways of observing the simultaneously enabling and constraining effects of their hard work. Amelia is already 'restless' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 244) in her pursuit of becoming a doctor. It is an ideal that she cherishes and achieving the grades for the one local university where she would accept a place is a key enabling step towards this. With strong emotional investment in ensuring her 'dream' depicted earlier, in Figure 34, can be realised, Amelia continually finds herself in situations where she believes she could do more to secure this university place and subsequently the medical career she aspires to (M. S. Archer, 2003). Typical of

Archer's (2007a) description of meta-reflexive perfectionism, Amelia is exceptionally demanding of herself during her GCSEs:

I'd go to bed at 12, wake up at 4, start revising again, I was just an overachiever (Amelia, interview, August 2019).

While this routine is intended as an enablement in her pursuit of university, Amelia is not oblivious to the risk she is taking and its potentially constraining effects. She knows that she could pay a high price in terms of her grades as well as her health if she continues to stretch herself physically and mentally throughout her studies yet is trying to live up to her value-commitments. Through a meta-reflexive lens, not working hard enough is thus entwined with the threat of falling short of her ideals, rather than the threat of individual failure. Although she reassesses the sacrifices she is prepared to make during sixth form, at this stage in her journey, she is willing to forfeit her well-being to ensure the advancement of her value-orientated goals.

5.5.2 Communicative Reflexivity: People-orientated Aspirations

Unlike in Archer's (2003, 2007a) work where her participants display a single dominant and established mode of reflexivity at any one time, Giulianna's account is a useful example of how students may frame their HE aspirations around concerns associated with different modes of reflexivity. In this way, Giulianna presents social motives, depicted in Figure 35, as well as personal motives, in her decision to apply to university. Similar to communicative reflexives who name 'people' as what they care about most and hold family and friends as their ultimate concerns (M. S. Archer, 2007a), Giulianna was using her high grades and university application to 'please' and 'propitiate' other family members (M. S. Archer, 2012, p. 131):



Figure 35: 'Family and Friends' - Giulianna, life-map, March 2019

in my mindset, I want to make my parents proud because of all the sacrifices they've made, because of all the things they've done for me. I want to give it back and the only way of giving it back is through me getting good grades

because that's what I'm good at, so might as well utilise what I'm good at and, like, give that sort of accomplishment to my parents (Giulianna, interview, August 2019)

In contrast to neoliberalism's upwardly mobile and market-driven student, Giulianna's desire to give back to her parents resembles how altruism is argued to play a role in working-class girls' HE decision making (S. Evans, 2009; Gilligan, 1982; Skeggs, 1997). Yet although her parents are enabling in the drive they give Giulianna to apply for HE, this does not mean that she shows a 'manifest lack of enthusiasm' for what she can individually gain from HE (M. S. Archer, 2012, p. 130). Instead, she expresses excitement about the 'new opportunities and extended horizons' that it can offer her (M. S. Archer, 2012) and simultaneously recognises how her parents may be potentially constraining of these aims. As a result, Giulianna evades the potentially enabling scholarship and contextual offer that her parents want her to accept from the local university, because it would mean living at home. Instead, she is excited about the independence she will gain from studying in a different city:

I'm going to be in a dorm with different people and I'm going to cook for myself and do my laundry myself and just doing everything for myself will teach me how to, you know, be independent again. Because I've always been dependent on my parents for food, for my clothes and stuff like that. Everything. Um, and I wanna like go away from. (Giulianna, interview, August 2019)

In this way, Giulianna places boundaries on how far she is willing to incorporate interpersonal concerns into her plans. Her parents provide a clear interpersonal motive for working hard and achieving high grades, but this is counterbalanced with going to university for her own personal benefit. She is thus balancing concerns characteristic of communicative reflexivity with autonomous reflexivity that will lead to individual gains and, in doing so, she enacts different forms of reflexivity for different purposes.

5.6 Dovetailing Interpersonal Concerns

Although interpersonal relationships are not the 'foundation blocks' of the girls' decision making (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 226), their stable accommodation to the

girls' other concerns during their educational trajectories is essential. As Margaret Archer (2007a, p. 223) describes, smooth 'dovetailing' of multiple concerns is a reflexive achievement and is necessary for the strategic action that the girls take in response to constraints and enablements. Yet, as the girls' accounts demonstrate, it is often 'hard won through painful learning and deliberative self-monitoring' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 169). This challenge plays out for many of the girls in the tensions that exist for female students between the competing concerns of being 'academically successful' and being 'socially successful' (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; Reay, 2001b; Renold & Allan, 2006; Skelton et al., 2010). The early years of secondary school are particularly difficult for Amelia in this regard:

And everyone was very cliquey and was like, were organised into these groups and there's the popular kids and the smart kids and you can't be friends with both. And because I wanted to be friends with both it caused arguments and was like, why are you speaking to them? Or, don't you want to be with your popular friends? (Amelia, interview, August 2019)

The tensions not only lead Amelia into arguments with peers but grow so strong that, as is illustrated in her life-map (Figure 36), she spends a month not attending school before moving her education elsewhere. Her experience highlights the complexities for girls in negotiating their academic and social lives and counters the stereotype of girls engaging with school life 'easily, naturally, and without struggle' (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015, p. 508). Amelia responds to the constraints of this situation with 'fractured' reflexivity, where her internal conversation seems to serve only to 'intensify [her] distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 93). This left her unable to move forward with either concern for a significant period of time, and thus unable to respond purposefully to the constraints and enablements that they presented her with.

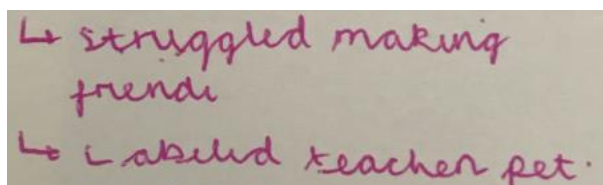


Figure 36: 'Withdrawing from school' - Amelia, life-map, March 2019

The apparent incommensurability between the determination and singularity that being a successful academic achiever demands and the concern for social relations that society expects from an 'acceptable girl' (Skelton et al., 2010, p. 187) is accepted by many of the girls during the early stages of secondary school. As their autonomous reflexivity develops, most are not reliant on the 'dense and intensive' relationships of communicative reflexivity and often 'see little place for themselves in the social domain' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 227). In an effort to elasticate their academic success in this context, the girls have carved out spaces that separate them from broader social expectations and allow them to pursue their studies autonomously (Renold & Allan, 2006). This is demonstrated in Alice's account of her academic diligence:

I've always been like the one to get your head down and I've always been the one to like never miss work, always do the work. So I think I was kind of lucky in that aspect, like organised and knowing what I wanted to get done. But also, having the social side of it, I would just completely isolate myself from people. (Alice, interview, July 2019)

Reflecting Archer's autonomous reflexives, who keep their mind on their job and plan intensively for the foreseeable (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 202), Alice is intently focussed on her academic studies. She recognises that this is an enablement that she can ride to secure high grades, yet in doing so also miscalculates the power of her social isolation to frustrate the very project she is trying to protect. Having failed to bring other social concerns into line or ensure that they are accommodated in due order (M. S. Archer, 2003), Alice explains via her life-map the social consequences that gradually eroded her sense of well-being (Figure 37):



↳ struggled making friends
↳ labeled teacher pet.

Figure 37: 'Social consequences of extreme academic focus' - Alice, life-map, March 2019

Among the girls, it was not uncommon for stories of personal pride at their academic capabilities to be told simultaneously with feelings of loneliness and marginalisation at these points in their lives (Skelton et al., 2010). This did not act as a deterrent to their academic application, but their efforts at maintaining a balance between the enabling and constraining aspects of their academic application were inevitably challenging. As the following sections show, to re-invest successfully and strategically in their studies they had to learn to navigate the boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviour for working-class girls and successfully dovetail their academic orientation with sociability in school.

5.6.1 Negotiating Social Expectations

Realising the potential for the social order to elasticate or constrain their success or well-being in school, the girls invested significant time and emotional resource into learning to accommodate interpersonal relationships into their academic plans. For some, this included working hard to find ways to incorporate 'correct' and 'acceptable' gender roles into their behaviours in school in order to mediate the risks of being seen as too academic (Skelton & Francis, 2005). This is illustrated by Nat's explanation of how her smartness and academic determination are carefully controlled and contained:

we all really like putting effort in but we weren't like nerds, we were like that middle ground where we were just like normal. We were really smart but we weren't, like, big about it, we weren't loud about it, we just got on with it which I liked because it's just the perfect amount for me where I felt like I wasn't like, I didn't feel like, not lonely, but you know when you just feel like people are watching me, people are going to be like, er she's like too smart for her own good, and stuff like that. (Nat, interview, August 2019)

Like in other studies that find high-achieving girls 'denying, downplaying, hiding, and silencing their successes and achievements' (Renold & Allan, 2006, p. 461), Nat is actively managing the risks of being seen as 'too smart' or proud in the gendered school environment. By projecting femininity in a way that will avoid the negative judgement of her peers, she seeks to mediate the 'highly contradictory expectations' of being academically successful and being an acceptable girl through her self-

restraint (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015, p. 510). In this way, through closely monitoring both herself and others, she holds back in the way she presents her smartness publicly to accommodate interpersonal concerns. Similar to the girls who 'know where to stop' in their academic pursuits, her carefully constrained behaviour is part of strategic action that ensures 'the social realm is given its due' but allows Nat to elasticate her academic plans (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 224).

Nevertheless, as working-class students who are exposed to more stringent constraints in their academic projects than their peers, the girls do not always have the considerable degree of freedom that is required to successfully balance their high-achievement and gender in school. Restricted in the academic support and guidance they can receive from home and needing to take charge of their own direction, downplaying their efforts and achievements is only ever a partial solution to dovetailing the social order alongside their academic pursuits. Being an unproblematic academic achiever who is well-behaved and does not make undue demands of the teacher is usually a formulation of white, middle-class femininity (L. Archer, Halsall, & Hollingworth, 2007b; Francis et al., 2012; Reay, 2001b). In other words, it is afforded to the girls' middle-class counterparts who can draw communicatively on their 'similar and familiars' (M. S. Archer, 2007a) outside of the school environment to sustain their academic success. As Estella explains:

all my other friends, they all got work experience based on their parents. Like, their parents reached out to their doctor friends or they reached out to their uncles and they all got work experience. But I had to like phone up my GP. So it was a lot more different from how I tried to get work experience. (Estella, interview, February 2019)

As working-class girls, whose relatives cannot provide them so easily with the resources, social connections and knowledge that they need, they do not always have the option to situate themselves passively within the discourse of femininity. Indeed, in the face of these constraints, Estella was strongly aware of the need to push herself in developing skills that would challenge these boundaries, and committed herself to doing so through the work experience she gained at a hospital:

So I'd already started volunteering at that time. I just knew where to focus on. So I had to focus on confidence, speaking loudly and clearly (Estella, interview, February 2019)

Investing in these personal characteristics is a necessity for Estella, who is reflexively aware that she needs to learn to cope successfully on her own in situations that are far removed from the experiences of other family members (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Yet although investing in these areas constitutes a powerful enablement in developing the independence she needs to fulfil her career ambitions, it also arguably breaks with ideals of appropriate feminine behaviour where ambition and assertion in women is seen as an attitude directed against others and is thus 'by its very nature confrontational' (S. Evans, 2009, p. 347). For working-class girls, remaining academically successful and on track to reach their career goals involves careful negotiation of how far they are willing to engage in 'traditional discourses of subordinate femininity' (Reay, 2001b).

5.6.2 Accentuating their Differences

Needing to assert their own needs and accentuate their social differences in order to elasticate their academic concerns, the girls are thus positioning themselves outside of the boundaries of what is considered to be 'proper school girl' femininity (Skelton et al., 2010). This was especially visible in their relationships with their teachers (Francis et al., 2012; Raby & Pomerantz, 2015) where safeguarding their academic success meant rejecting constraining forms of quiet and passive femininity that align with the dominant educational discourse of the 'ideal' female pupil (L. Archer et al., 2007b). These predominantly passive behaviours have the power to frustrate academic projects since they lead to girls' learning needs being overlooked or marginalised by their teachers (Skelton et al., 2010). Therefore, Amelia in her own words had 'always been pushy' (interview, August 2019) and was not afraid draw attention to herself in lessons:

Like, I'll sit there in class and I'm like 'this is so cool'. Like in chemistry especially coz you just learn so much. And it will be hard and I will complain, like I am very vocal when I complain, I'm like 'this is so hard!' (Amelia, interview, August 2018)

While she was not displaying open defiance in the classroom, her confident expression enabled her to receive in-class support ‘on her own terms’ (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Attending a school where few students progress to high-tariff universities, Amelia is unwilling to yield to this distinctively gendered constraint by downplaying her assertiveness. Although this positioned Amelia ‘outside of the boundaries of feminine traits’ (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015), she describes how she ‘can’t just sit around and wait for all these things to happen’ (interview, August 2019). Breaking the constraints of acceptable femininity in school is thus a defensive act for many of the girls, which is intended to safeguard their academic achievement and ambitions. It thus forms part of the strategic action they take to pursue their academic and career goals and becomes an enablement for their futures.

5.7 Straddling Different Modes of Reflexivity

While the girls are demonstrating many characteristics of developing autonomous reflexivity, a significant difference to the adults in Margaret Archer’s (2007a) work is how they also straddle other modes of reflexivity depending on the situations they are in and the constraints or enablements that they encounter. As they progress through school there are an increasing number of opportunities for the girls to meet other people who share similar academic and career concerns to their own. These are people with whom they can engage in ‘thought and talk’ to support their decision making interpersonally rather than only doing so as an internal deliberative process (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 167). To seize on their support as enablements to the plans they are making for their futures, the girls are thus also demonstrating tendencies more associated with communicative reflexivity. For Nat, this meant turning to her favourite teacher to discuss the university decisions that she was making:

I did speak to my economics teacher a lot because I said about accountancy and stuff and she said, ‘have you thought about doing a straight economics degree?’ and I was like, I’ve not really, and she was looking, because I was thinking obviously I know I’m getting the grades but I was never even, I dunno, it never really clicked in my head that that’s something I would do. But then when she said, and I was looking into it, and I was like ‘oh my god all these things are so interesting’. I was like ‘ok’. (Nat, interview, August 2019)

Like in Nat's account, teachers are frequently sought out to confirm the girls' decisions or provide the dialogical guidance that they have not been able to seek or find elsewhere. Similar to what Fisher (2019) describes as a 'back up' person, they were used by the girls to source help in their education or bolster their confidence to believe they could succeed academically. As Margaret Archer (2003) points out, the basis for these conversations is trust. As people who are closely acquainted with the students and intimately involved in their current academic contexts, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers often earned this accolade and, like in Nat's life-map (Figure 38), were often praised by the girls for the support they gave. Close relationships with individual teachers and descriptions of them as 'friends' and 'family' were enablements in the girls' accounts. In situations where their natal background provided no guidelines for the present decisions they were making, these teachers were 'trusted to understand them sufficiently' to help the girls make their decisions with knowledge that they might not have been able to access on their own (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 320).

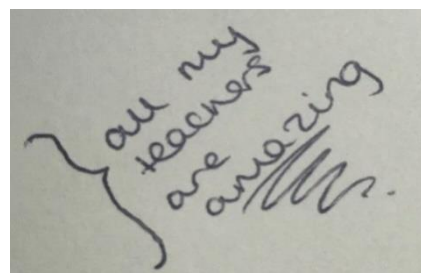


Figure 38: 'All my teachers are amazing' - Freya, life-map, March 2019

Since trust needs to be earned by interlocutors, Archer (2003, p. 168) suggests 'brief encounters' do not resonate with the needs of communicative reflexivity. Yet this is not the case for the girls in this study, whose age and social backgrounds mean that they are limited in the network of support they can draw on. Unwilling to confine their university decision making to their immediate family or school contexts, many of the girls are forced outside of their comfort zones and strategically seek dialogical guidance from people who they are unlikely to see again. In this way, they straddle tendencies associated with both communicative and autonomous modes of reflexivity. For instance, uncertain whether to stay on for an extra year at sixth form or progress directly to university to study Fine Art after Year 13 (Figure 39), Claire reached out to someone she met at a university fair:

I was asking the person, the kind of student that was on the stall, like, 'I'm trying to like consider, um, doing like an art foundation, would you kind of suggest, is that like a good idea?' and he was sort of saying 'well, you know, most art students kind of like do that and then go onto university' and I was thinking, well, that kind of helped with my decision (Claire, interview, July 2019)

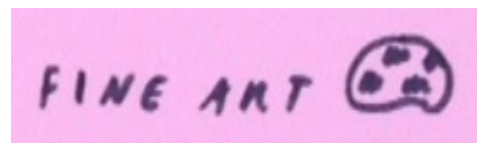


Figure 39: 'Fine Art' - Claire, life-map, March 2019

As Claire's account demonstrates, reaching out to strangers involves the girls placing their trust where it has not been earned, in a way that students from more privileged backgrounds may not have to. While the lack of knowledge among friends and family in their original context is a potential constraint to their decision making, it ensures that drive and determination is needed in seeking out new interlocutors. For students like Claire, these encounters may be brief but they transform the direction of their futures. Moreover, the fact of their successful academic elastication through encounters with new people and unfamiliar contexts in the present, may act as an objective enablement to their confidence in interacting with strangers to inform their decisions in the future.

The girls' encounters with new dialogic partners are particularly powerful enablements when they take place with people who have shared biographies and similar backgrounds to their own. In this way, they help to challenge feelings of alienation and exclusion that constitute significant constraints for working-class girls applying to high-tariff universities and seeking out elite careers. For example, meeting a student representative was important for Tegan in her deliberations about whether she would apply to Cambridge:

in my head I'm like, that's way above me. Like, [X] in his talk he was like 'you can do it', it was like an inspirational talk because he was from Leeds and he was like, you know, my mum didn't go to uni and I never thought, and now he's like, he went to Cambridge and he does the course (Tegan, interview, September 2019)

Similarly, a chance encounter during Nat's work experience at a prestigious accounting firm encouraged her ambitions:

he was doing one of the presentations and he came and sat down on our table and was like 'are you from the north?' and I was like 'yeah' and then I was laughing and so then we had a good chat and he just made me feel good, coz I was like yeah, see, we're here, we can handle ourselves. (Nat, interview, August 2019)

The people that Tegan and Nat meet during these activities are not 'familiar' with whom they have grown up, but they are nevertheless 'similar' in the sense of their common experiences. Although the girls emulate communicative tendencies as they engage dialogically with them, they do so with developing autonomous reflexivity in order to expose themselves to further knowledge 'about their society and about themselves' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 253). To this end, they do not seek to extend their 'contextual continuity' (M. S. Archer, 2007a), but have found people who act as enablements in developing their contextual *discontinuity*. Indeed, part of their value is, as O'Sullivan et al. (2019) describe, that they are models of agency. The representatives' similar social and geographical backgrounds, along with the trajectories that they have taken away from them, establish enough implicit trust for the girls to consider these people as trustworthy guides in planning for their own futures. Knowing that these people have overcome similar constraints to those they encounter themselves, clearly bolsters the girls' self-esteem and ability to believe in their own potential.

5.7.1 Strategic Communicative Reflexivity

During sixth form, the girls continue to take strategic action to increase their knowledge about the HE options available to them, and counter the constraints of their access to this elsewhere, by attending schemes and events. These are an important source of university-led information about HE participation, but they also facilitate connections with other students from similar social backgrounds to their own. Like in their interactions with teachers and strangers, these are embraced through the 'thought and talk' pattern of communicative reflexivity (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 159) but offer the girls new perspectives about their futures. Tegan, for example, describes a new friend from a university summer school with whom she regularly discusses different university options:

I think it was uni of East Anglia, I hadn't even heard of really, but she loves it and then I looked into it and I was like, well I'll go see it. Whereas me and my friends we all have the same, the same unis in our heads because we've had the same teachers and the same, whereas she's completely different. So that was really cool. (Tegan, interview, September 2019)

As Tegan's account shows, the girls are conscious of the ways in which they are making decisions within the constraints of their current social and educational placement and do not want these confines to 'become the bound to [their] knowledge' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 253). New friendships 'spell a change of interlocuters' (M. S. Archer, 2012, p. 149) that is therefore welcomed as a counteraction to this and act as valuable enablements to broaden their decision making. Although they are students who have coped successfully by themselves by drawing on autonomous reflexivity in many unfamiliar situations, they are not ignorant to the limits of their knowledge, and thus seize on the mutually advantageous exchange of information. While these may be friendships established through the students' utility to each other, the girls orientate themselves towards dialogic partners with whom they can deliberate their autonomous educational aims communicatively.

For many of the girls, it is through the establishment of 'academic friendship groups' that they demonstrate particularly strong communicative tendencies. While they often struggle in the earlier stages of secondary school to negotiate conflicting academic and social tensions, as they progress through school and begin to select their own subject options at GCSE and then at A-level, the students around them become more academically similar. Again, this constitutes a 'positive reinforcement loop' where the fact of their successful elastication in the past, acts as an objective enablement in the present (M. S. Archer, 2007a). As Leah describes:

sixth form's different now. No one's really disruptive so much, or purposely disruptive I should say, because we all sort of do the same thing (Leah, interview, September 2019)

This means that the girls are increasingly surrounded by others who are academically 'similar' to themselves, and thus offer things that resonate with their own needs and concerns. In this way, the friendships that they depict in their life-maps (Figure 40, Figure 41) also relate to peers that the girls increasingly turn to in order to 'share their problems, discuss decisions and thus externalise much of what [would otherwise be] an internal deliberative process' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 167).



Figure 40: 'Friendship' - Leah, life-map, March 2019



Figure 41: 'Friends' - Haley, life-map, May 2018

For example, Mollie describes the important role of her friends in managing the pressures and stresses of A-levels:

I'd like to think I could handle it by myself but talking with my friends and stuff they felt the same way then. So it's just nice to have people who are similar and can see what's going on (Mollie, interview, January 2019)

Like Mollie, many of the girls are using their academic friendship groups to resolve challenges interpersonally. These academic friendship groups are vital forms of support for the girls and provide them with places where each friend reflects the 'same' and 'thus confirms each other's behaviour as acceptable, legitimate, and normal' (Renold, 2001, p. 583). While the girls in these instances may be indistinguishable from Archer's description of communicative reflexivity, it is notable how they engage in these friendship groups strategically to meet autonomous needs that might otherwise be contracted. In these ways, friends may act as an academic back up to support them in their studies and safeguard their academic success, as Haley describes:

I'd always know that say if I missed a lesson or if there was something that I was struggling with they would make time to help me and I would do the same for them. So that was really important for me, to have similar friends (Haley, interview, August 2018)

Alternatively, as Tegan explains, friends may support with access to material resources that are an investment necessary to their futures but due to objective financial constraints they might not be able to afford on their own:

Well, me and my friend are both thinking of medicine, so we said we'd both buy, say half. We have, it's like a reading list we found, we'll buy and share books and we can just, I'll read it and then you can have it. So rather than buy like 10 each. (Tegan, interview, September 2019)

In both examples, academic friendships are used productively by the students to navigate constraints that threaten to contract their collective and individual high achievement and ultimately their university and career concerns. While there are many ways in which they engage dialogically in these social relations through communicative reflexivity, this is notably combined with autonomous strategies that capitalise on these friendships as enablements and harness them to enact their educational aims.

5.8 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the working-class girls in this thesis have developed a strong awareness of the structural and cultural conditions that are likely to promote and hinder their journeys to university. It began by exploring how the girls are learning to avoid society's 'snakes' and climb its 'ladders' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 109) in situations that are progressively discontinuous with their original social settings and set them apart from their families and similarly situated peers. By adopting a strategic stance towards constraints and enablements they are transforming rather than replicating their social positioning in notable ways, and gradually enacting change in their lives. However, as the findings also demonstrate, although the girls are repeatedly exposed to new situations that prompt them to re-evaluate old projects in light of new information, they are not 'master strategists' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 152). Strategic action is always at the mercy of unforeseen and

unforeseeable contingencies (M. S. Archer, 2003) and the chapter therefore explained the situations in which structure trumps agency and the girls' projects are constrained against the backdrop of social inequalities relating to their class and gender. To this end, the girls' reflexivity is not indicative or predictive of where they may end up in the future. Any one of the girls may do things or have things happen to them that change their trajectories. However, what is significant is how the potentially emancipatory processes of reflexive deliberation might get them there.

The ways in which the girls' projects activate simultaneously enabling and constraining powers relating to their personal characteristics has been considered throughout this chapter, but it was made particularly visible by drawing on the neoliberal and post-feminist context in which their autonomous reflexivity operates. Furthermore, by reframing the girls' aspirations outside of this ideological context, it has also been possible to observe how they are not only applying to HE for the purpose of 'self-betterment' but are nurturing other concerns alongside their academic pursuits. It is through reflexivity that the girls' alternative conceptualisations of educational success thus become clear and can be used to challenge widely held beliefs about what HE is for. Finally, departing from Margaret Archer's work, the chapter has also shown how the girls are straddling different reflexive modes to achieve their aims, depending on the situations they find themselves in and the resources available to them at the time. Overall, the chapter has presented the striking ways in which the girls are developing reflexivity in order to achieve their university goals and how they use it to ride the enablements and circumvent the constraints that their educational projects activate in the context of social class and gender.

Chapter 6

Thesis Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This thesis set out to explain how a small number of working-class girls were making noticeably different educational decisions leading to their proposed application to high-tariff universities. Drawing on its foundations in critical realism, it recognised that their proposed progression was not happening by chance or without reasons and thus drew on Margaret Archer's (2003, 2007a, 2012) theorising to unearth the contexts, conditions and capabilities involved. Consequently, it has opened up explanations of how structures constrain and enable the university intentions of the girls in this research, as well as how the girls employ reflexivity to reproduce and transform structures over the course of their educational trajectories. This morphogenetic approach to the girls' decision making is key to explaining why they do not act according to expectations. It offers a new perspective on high-achieving, working-class girls' educational decision making that has been hitherto unobserved and offers new explanations for how they are proposing to apply to high-tariff universities in ways that other research does not predict for them.

As the thesis draws together its conclusions, this chapter is mindful of the research questions posed in the introduction. Together, they sought an explanatory account of working-class girls' decision making and proposed engagement with high-tariff universities. This chapter therefore responds to these questions collectively to demonstrate the 'form' and 'ingredients' involved in the shaping of the girls' trajectories (Porpora, 2013) through Archer's morphogenetic theorising.

- How do factors relating to social class and gender influence high-achieving, working-class girls' relationships with education?
- How do high-achieving, working-class girls respond to these factors, leading to their engagement with education and proposed application to high-tariff universities?
- How does reflexivity inform their decision-making processes?

The chapter begins by explaining how structural tensions impinge on working-class girls' decision making in the form of constraints and enablements, as well as their reflexive responses to them. It makes the point that these girls do not respond to their circumstances in habitual ways, with predictable outcomes, but are making strategic decisions with higher levels of autonomy than other research gives them credit for. Drawing on a more dynamic understanding of reflexivity than Archer's work provides, it makes an important contribution to explanations of how working-class girls decide to apply to high-tariff universities. This has implications for policy and practice in the changing context of access to HE and presents opportunities for future research. Overall, the chapter carves out the thesis's contributions to knowledge, theory and methodology.

6.2 Structural Tensions

With a dearth of research that investigates the educational trajectories of high-achieving girls from working-class backgrounds who are proposing to apply to high-tariff universities, this thesis makes an important contribution to knowledge about the ways their decision making is classed, gendered and complicated. Were the thesis only to have focussed on the outcomes of the girls' decision making, such as their achievement of high grades or progression to high-tariff universities, it might have been easy to align with the post-feminist narrative that they are able to 'do, be and have' anything that they choose (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, p. 13) or the neoliberal assumption that through enough 'skill and will' they have had straightforward pathways to academic success (Devlin, 2013; Houghton et al., 2021). Instead, it recognises the 'differentially advantageous places' from which working-class girls start their education compared to their middle-class and male counterparts (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 54). Their high-grades and university intentions do not mean that they are exempt from the backdrop of challenges and inequalities associated with social class and gender, which is well-documented in this thesis and corresponding research literature (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 5). However, the thesis shows that as the girls in this study confront the contextual discontinuity between their foreground and background, they work with and around structure to gradually enact change in their lives.

In practice, this means that the girls are learning to avoid society's 'snakes' and climb its 'ladders' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 109). However, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, contrary to post-feminist and neoliberal assumptions, the impact of social class and gender in their lives is not easily remedied (Reay, 2021). This plays out strongly through the interconnectedness of constraints and enablements, which simultaneously constrict and elasticate their university projects. The tensions between these opposing powers move the current study beyond a focus on classed and gendered 'barriers' to HE participation (Gorard & Smith, 2007), which elsewhere position working-class young people as constricted in their university decisions because of structural constraints or personal dispositions (Loveday, 2015a; Perez-Adamson & Mercer, 2016; Reay et al., 2005). Instead, it offers a more nuanced understanding of the hindrances and opportunities that the high-achieving, working-class girls in this thesis are actively and strategically dealing with. Importantly, it does not deny the very real challenges that impinge on their proposed plans to apply to high-tariff HEIs, but illuminates the factors they negotiate to propel their university intentions as much as the ones that constrain them.

6.3 Ideological Tensions

This focus on constraints and enablements, has also provided a valuable lens for observing the ways in which high-achieving, working-class girls manage the neoliberal insistence on meritocracy during their education. This ideological context encourages young people to construct their pathways to university individualistically and in competitive settings, where the rewards of academic success are strong enablements that encourage them to work hard to realise aspirational futures beyond where they grew up (Brooks, 2013; Clark et al., 2015; Reay, 2018a). However, like the narrative around barriers, it suggests a deficit model of decision making among young people who do not participate in HE or attend lower status institutions and implies there is a need to 'correct' this. This creates tensions for the current research, which does not seek to insinuate that objective constraints have been easily fixed in the lives of the high-achieving, working-class girls who contributed their experiences. On the contrary, by showing how they adapt and respond to their circumstances, this thesis argues that the girls' trajectories are not simple stories of

how to turn disadvantage into advantage. Rather, it highlights the remarkable ways in which this group of high-achieving, working-class girls strategically advance and protect their academic projects in often challenging situations.

Drawing on the lens of constraints and enablements, the girls are arguably driven just as much by the fear of failure as they are by a meritocratic ideal. With HE characterised as a 'private good' (Allen & Ainley, 2013, p. 71), leading to advanced opportunities for graduates on completion of their degree (Bathmaker et al., 2016), they are alert to the objective value of their plans and invest in the opportunities available to them. However, they also assume significant personal responsibility for doing so and recognise that they can easily loose out. This means that the girls are constructing their educational pathways in relation to situations that they are also in constant tension with. As neoliberal and post-feminist views come together to reinforce notions of 'effortlessly' successful girls in contrast to 'predictably' failing boys (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020), there is a heavy burden on these young women to strive to be individually successful and take responsibility for their own outcomes. As Chapter 5 shows, they have strong feelings of personal guilt and self-blame when they struggle academically, experience moments of indecision or do not achieve perfect grades. It is therefore important not to lose sight of these feelings as responses to structural inequalities. They are enablements that drive the girls to work exceptionally hard in their studies and, simultaneously, are incredibly damaging to their health and well-being.

6.4 Beyond Habitual Action

While they cannot abstract themselves from the complex constellation of constraints and enablements that simultaneously elasticate and constrict their plans, the high-achieving, working-class girls in this study are clearly not passive young women to whom things happen. Theorised in this research as the exercise of reflexive agency (M. S. Archer, 2007a), their active engagement with constraints and enablements has offered an original way of explaining why there is no single, predictable outcome in the educational trajectories of working-class girls. This departs from the ways in which theory operates in much of the existing research literature, which draws

heavily on Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) theories of cultural and social reproduction to understand classed differences in students' educational trajectories (Donnelly & Evans, 2016) and the boundaries that structure conceivable HE choices (Bathmaker, 2021; Reay et al., 2005). Indeed, it is argued in this thesis that even studies that draw on Bourdieu's concepts to explain how working-class students make decisions to apply to university outside of the 'norm' of their social class (Crozier et al., 2019; Ingram, 2011) misrecognise the amount of agency that these young people bring to the decision-making process when applying to high-tariff HEIs.

Instead, the current study rekindles the role of agency within the decision-making process of students who might not otherwise be expected to apply to highly selective HEIs. Observed through the lens of reflexivity, it shows that the working-class girls in the current research did not react habitually to the situations they encountered in the course of their educational trajectories, but with the capacity to adapt and respond to them. This does not make them 'master strategists' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 214) and the previous chapter has shown that sometimes they miscalculate their next steps or are unable to move forward productively with their plans. However, their agency is key to explaining what they individually make of the 'differentially advantageous places' from which they have commenced their education (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 54), rather than relying on generalisations about their probable courses of action. They should be recognised in future research as strong evaluators who make deliberate decisions about their educational engagement and progression to high-tariff universities.

6.4.1 Developing Autonomous Reflexivity

The girls' educational decisions were not, therefore, contingent on the distribution of constraints and enablements in the situations they found themselves in. Instead, it was the 'strategic' stance that they increasingly adopted towards them that was leading to their proposed engagement with high-tariff universities (M. S. Archer, 2003). For many of the girls this was a stance that developed as a result of their early years of schooling. Their positive experiences of learning amplified their academic ambitions and eventually brought them into contact with opportunities and

obstacles for which they had no familiar precedent for how to respond. For others, their strategic responses to structure were developed through their initial experiences of not doing well in school or underestimating their own potential. While redefining their goals facilitated their future academic ambitions, it set them apart from the known experiences of family and similarly situated peers and meant they were managing their new trajectories largely on their own. Described in this study through their *developing* autonomous reflexivity, they were thus making decisions that might be considered to be 'innovative' or 'risky' in their original social contexts (M. S. Archer, 2007a) and were becoming increasingly self-reliant in pursuit of their academic goals since there were no familiar templates or resources already available to them.

The 'momentum' that the girls built through their successful navigation of situations that were progressively discontinuous from those they had previously known was pivotal in driving forward their university goals. As the previous chapter discussed, they were learning to make sense of settings where they had no precedent for how to act, and the experiences they gained and their confidence in learning to handle them were mutually reinforcing. It is in this way that the girls were developing their autonomous reflexivity and starting to exploit their power as agents to gradually enact change in their lives. Presenting this as part of a morphogenetic approach to structure and agency (M. S. Archer, 1995, 2003), the thesis thus argues that their decision making is a transformative process. With the potential to change their own knowledge and viewpoints, as well as to change and be changed by those around them, coping with contextual discontinuity is a powerful enablement in the girls' trajectories along very different pathways to what otherwise might have been predicted for them. Working-class girls have much higher levels of autonomy in their own decision making than other research gives them credit for, and this allows their journeys to extend well beyond the 'objective possibilities' inscribed in their social positioning (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 47).

6.4.2 Communicative Reflexivity

Whilst the girls were acquiring an independence to make their own way in the world through their developing autonomous reflexivity, a key finding from this thesis is that there were also times when they were unable or unwilling to confine their university decision making to their own internal judgements. As working-class girls, with no family history of entry to HE, they had little precedent for how to respond to the opportunities and obstacles that they were activating (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2009). It was thus through necessity that some of the girls deployed communicative patterns of reflexivity as part of their decision making, as well as only autonomous ones. In this way, many of the girls sought dialogic guidance from other people to complete their internal deliberations through 'thought and talk' (M. S. Archer, 2003, p. 159). As the previous chapter discussed, this often included teachers, as the people the girls were closest to who they knew had been to university or conversations with university staff or professionals who shared similar backgrounds and journeys to their own. Furthermore, as the girls increasingly established academic friendships, they drew interpersonally on these relationships.

Importantly, however, communicative reflexivity was not being used here according to Archer's description so that the girls could endorse and 'anchor' themselves in the stable and continuous contexts into which they were born (M. S. Archer, 2003, 2007a). The girls were using this form of reflexivity as a 'strategic' manoeuvre to advance their university projects in the face of constraints and enablements, rather than deploying it in Archer's more restricted terms as a deliberate attempt to 'evade' them (2003, 2007a). By externalising what might otherwise have remained an intrinsic deliberative process, they were thus enacting their conversations with these external agents as enablements to their educational aims. The way reflexivity is used interchangeably as the girls actively respond to their circumstances thus provides greater insight into their responses to constraints and enablements and the complexities of their decision making. This reinforces the point that the girls in this study are active agents, rather than static subjects with fixed forms of reflexivity and associated agency. As such, they closely monitor their circumstances and are able to adapt their reflexive responses as their situations change (Dyke et al., 2012).

6.4.3 Dynamic Reflexivity

Drawing on the way that the girls were straddling communicative modes of reflexivity alongside their autonomous ones, the thesis proposes a more dynamic understanding of reflexivity than Archer's work provides. In this way, it builds on the small body of literature that was presented in Chapter 3 (Baker, 2019; Bovill, 2012; Dyke et al., 2012; Porpora & Shumar, 2010) in order to move away from Archer's notion of 'types' or 'dominant' forms of reflexivity (2003, 2007a). It is argued instead that individuals can adopt different reflexive modes for different purposes and in different circumstances. This is not because, as Margaret Archer might suggest, the reflexivity of young people is 'incomplete' (2012, p. 104) or their goals 'provisional' (2015). Instead, for the girls in this study, it is a response to the complexity of the structural demands they are dealing with. Reflexivity is thus developed as a strategy that each of the girls deploy, albeit in different ways, to reach their academic goals. This offers a new perspective on how high-achieving, working-class girls undertake their educational decision making that has been hitherto unobserved.

6.5 Reframing Aspirations

This more dynamic understanding of reflexivity has also offered greater scope for explaining the varied concerns driving working-class girls to make decisions to attend high-tariff universities. In many ways, those in this study are positioning themselves as 'investors' in education, who formulate their academic projects around degrees and careers that will enhance their future prospects and provide a return that will materially improve their futures (Allen & Ainley, 2013; Clark et al., 2015). Most of the girls have not experienced financial security in the past and have rarely had opportunities to travel and are incredibly excited about the opportunities undertaking a degree from a high-tariff university can bring. They might therefore be described as 'active consumers' (Brooks, 2013), who are attracted by the possibilities for themselves within the transactional model of the current HE system, where tuition fees are exchanged for the promise of an economically rewarding career (Cunningham & Samson, 2021). As such, they manifest concerns typical of autonomous reflexivity as they seize on enablements and circumvent constraints in

ways that are intended to satisfy 'individual preferences' and leave them personally 'better off' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 264). It is an educational context that expects particular profiles of reflexivity from students, in particular from those who are not already advantageously positioned in relation to it.

Yet individual, material gain was not the only reason the girls in this study were applying to university. Reframing their aspirations using a more dynamic understanding of reflexivity, shows that some of the girls were not only making educational decisions for their own future benefit. They are nurturing other concerns alongside those appointed by neoliberalism. These include concerns that are associated with meta-reflexivity, which are linked to students wanting to 'make a difference' in the lives of others and meeting others' needs over their own (M. S. Archer, 2007a). Similarly, they include concerns associated with communicative reflexivity, where efforts to please and propitiate family members influence a student's decision making. Both these examples of reflexively informed decision making present an alternative conceptualisation of what university is for and what students may gain from it. They show that social mobility is not an absolute goal for all students, and present different ways of thinking of the purpose of university-level study and the benchmarks of educational 'success'.

6.6 Implications For Policy and Practice

The last twelve months have seen a changing direction in the WP agenda for universities. This has set out revised priorities for the access and success of disadvantaged young people accompanied by a renewed focus on monitoring the quality of these students' university experiences and their eventual outcomes (OfS, 2022c, 2022d). Alongside the government's skills for jobs strategy (DfE, 2021b) and levelling up agenda (DfE, 2021a), much of the HE landscape is set to be affected by these proposals. Therefore, building on the discussion of Access and Participation Plans, initiated in Chapter 2, it is appropriate that the implications of this thesis can be situated within this context.

Firstly, it is important to recognise how high predicted grades and traditional academic subjects have offered wide degrees of freedom for the girls in this thesis

when exploring their future options (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020; Skelton & Francis, 2005). Their successful academic elastication in school has constituted a significant objective enablement for their plans, including opportunities to engage with HE options and careers that they might not have otherwise encountered. This bears many similarities to the shifting agenda for access and participation in the realm of HE, with the OfS instructed by recent government ministers to ensure that providers are 'working altruistically with students – supporting them to achieve the highest possible grades' (Zahawi & Donelan, 2021). The revised priorities mean that universities will be expected to form partnerships with schools with the specific aim of raising attainment. While these activities will not come fully into play until 2023, they centre on making sure that all young people, like the girls in this study, are 'qualified and equipped to make [...] choices right for them' (OfS, 2021b, p. 6). The current study cannot claim whether suggested schemes, such as offering university students and lecturers to tutor school pupils (DfE, 2021a), will have a causal effect on improving attainment. However, corresponding with the government's intentions, the girls' high grades were certainly facilitating their proposed entry to high-tariff universities as 'official' indicators of smartness. Furthermore, it was, in part, the girls' academic attainment that exposed them to novel situations that they learned to successfully navigate and thus contributed to the momentum that was sustaining their engagement with education over time.

However, as this thesis shows, enablements do not exist without the concomitants of constraints. Like the interventions proposed above, the girls attempted to make the most of the opportunities they encountered in school and used summer schools, work experience and high-achievers' schemes as springboards for their futures. However, they also recognised that when provided with these opportunities, they were expected to succeed. Aware of the 'differentially advantageous places' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 54) from which they started their education compared to more affluent peers, they expressed strong emotions and deep anxieties about their potential for academic failure. Whilst it is rare that these tensions are recognised within policy, it is surprising that the role of education as a benefit for young people's well-being and mental health is not more distinctively addressed within the new

directive for universities in revising their access and participation plans (OfS, 2022c), or in recent government publications that set out new proposals for education and skills (DfE, 2021b). This is significant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing evidence of its impact on children and young people (Chen & Lucock, 2022), especially those from the least privileged backgrounds (Montacute & Holt-White, 2021). Instead, whilst efforts to raise attainment and remedy barriers in access to HE certainly act as an enablement for high-achieving girls like those in this study, they also perpetuate the narrative that disadvantage can easily be turned into advantage. High-achieving, working-class students could therefore be better supported in their journeys by a more expansive understanding in policy of the constraints they will encounter alongside the enablements that universities might provide.

Corresponding with this focus on university input into improving attainment in schools, is the government's renewed emphasis on outputs leading to 'good graduate outcomes' for disadvantaged students (Zahawi & Donelan, 2021). The future careers of the working-class girls in this thesis cannot be predicted from its findings, yet, like the government agenda suggests, it is clear that they are embarking on their journeys towards them from unequal starting points. As Chapter 5 shows, they face challenges in securing work experience, accessing career and university advice and guidance, and make decisions about future pathways late in their education when subject options have already been fixed. The fact of attending a high-tariff university is unlikely to offset the entirety of this disadvantage, especially compared to the more privileged peers they will likely encounter there. However, the recent universities minister's (Donelan, 2021) contention that the sector needs to make 'getting on as important as getting in', reiterated in the regulator's revised access and participation agenda (OfS, 2022c) and new quality conditions (OfS, 2022b, 2022d), is pertinent to the prospects of the girls in this study. Indeed, it has the potential to address some of the significant structural challenges they may experience in their proposed pathways beyond this study.

However, 'getting on' should not be misrecognised only in terms of an economic return or investment. With 'positive outcomes' often depicted in this way by UniConnect (OfS, 2021e) and the OfS (2022d) there is a strong suggestion that

“disadvantaged students’, through their investment, have an enhanced opportunity for upward mobility’ (Cunningham & Samson, 2021, p. 2). On the contrary, as the current study shows, not all working-class girls are solely or primarily motivated by a drive towards upward social mobility and their priorities are not only based on work or employment. Those in this study have ambitious personal plans to materially improve their futures through travel, money for future lifestyles and career prospects that will leave them individually better off. However, as the notion of ‘dynamic’ reflexivity in this thesis has shown, their proposed trajectories are simultaneously about more than only ‘upward’ social mobility. Instead, they are framed around a broader understanding of university’s social goods. Importantly, they indicate that more could be done to reframe entry into HE outside of a market driven and economically orientated approach, as part of a wider project where students can establish their university intentions in line with their underlying values and concerns. Focusing only on the personal or economic rewards and benefits of studying at a high-tariff institution creates a narrow view of educational success that is challenged by the nature of reflexive decision making in this thesis.

Correspondingly, the focus on inputs and outputs also overlooks how working-class girls are not just service receivers of access and participation initiatives. Instead, as this thesis demonstrates, they should be positioned as strong evaluators who are adept at making strategic decisions about their education. Rekindling the role of agency in this research shows that working-class girls are highly attuned to the constraints associated with their class and gender during their applications to high-tariff universities, as well as those they anticipate confronting once there. Likewise, it has shown that they are savvy and strategic in the ways they employ enablements to sustain their motivation and to seize on the opportunities that they expect to facilitate their journeys into and through them. These girls are not passive agents and negotiate the challenges and opportunities that surround them in exceptional ways. It is important that high-tariff HEIs recognise this and challenge presupposed assumptions about working-class girls’ prior and anticipated experiences. Recognising the tenacity and capabilities of the young women in this study, these

highly selective universities should be places that merit applications from working-class girls rather than vice versa.

6.7 Researching Reflexivity *with* Young People

While there is considerable debate about Margaret Archer's work and its place in social theory (Elder-Vass, 2007a; Sayer, 2010b), the move from the theoretical into the empirical is rarely made elsewhere (Caetano, 2015a). This thesis has therefore not followed the prescription of previously published work to design the research but develops new ways of answering ontological questions about university decision making. The approaches, outlined in Chapter 4, that were designed to integrate Archer's theoretical standpoint into the practical research in this thesis, thus make an important contribution methodological knowledge.

This contribution includes the use of Archer's morphogenetic framework to guide the analysis and interpretation of data (2003, 2007a). Drawing on inductive strategies to identify and report themes emerging from each life-map and interview, as well as a theory-driven process with reflexivity as the object of study, has been a new way of applying the morphogenetic model in practice. It has unpacked not only how the girls' contexts were objectively shaped and their actions and interactions within these contexts, but also how reflexive deliberation filters the ways the girls respond to these contexts and leads to their proposed engagement with high-tariff universities. This original, dual perspective provides a valuable framework for analysing the interplay of structure and agency in future research, as individuals decide how to act in situations that 'were not of their making or choosing' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 19). In particular, with its ontological focus on change, it is well-suited to the study of events, such as those in this thesis, that do not follow predictable patterns and routines.

Furthermore, since the girls in this study are presented as active agents who have high levels of autonomy in their own decision making, methodologically, the thesis strengthens the argument for doing research *with* rather than *on* young people (Thomson, 2008). It is not the first time that creative methods of research have been used to achieve this (Lundy, 2007; Mannay et al., 2017; Veale, 2008). The life-

mapping method and the ensuing elicitation interviews are not entirely different from the way that other studies have worked with young people to investigate their thoughts and feelings (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Mannay, 2016). However, it is the first time that these methods have been used for the specific purpose of studying young people's reflexivity. This offers unique insights into the girls' educational decision making that give prominence to each girl's personal reasons for engaging with high-tariff universities, rather than the researcher 'revealing it' (Thomson, 2008). Omitting these perspectives, would have made it difficult to explain how these sixteen high-achieving, working-class girls apply to high-tariff universities outside of the 'norm' of their social class or made it easy to miss the nuances of their encounters with enablements and constraints. Focusing instead on each girl's self-warrant to explain her own educational trajectory (M. S. Archer, 2007b) acknowledges the role of agency in the decision-making process and the right of these active young women to have their voices heard (Lundy, 2007).

While life-mapping could facilitate narratives about the girls' past and present, the study of reflexivity also 'entails understanding their intentions' (M. S. Archer, 2007a, p. 20). The importance of the girls' genuine involvement in the research therefore also extended to the cardboard cut-out of a future person that the majority used to explain the way they envisaged their lives and concerns in the future. As previous studies contend, producing knowledge about imagined futures that is not vague or abstract is a challenge (Lyon & Carabelli, 2016). Consequently, the current study is not alone in turning to a creative and arts-based method to facilitate more material and detailed depictions of the future (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016; Ravn, 2021). Like the combination of life-mapping and elicitation interviews, the use of a 'future person' has not previously been undertaken for the specific study of reflexivity. In the current research, it served as a useful 'anchor' (Ravn, 2021, p. 2) for distilling concerns that were driving the girls to deliberate and respond to constraints and enablements in the strategic ways that they did. Therefore, enabling the girls to share their future concerns, not only retrospective experiences, contributed to the richness of the research on reflexivity in this thesis.

Finally, just as reflexivity was employed strategically by the girls to closely monitor the situations that they encountered during their educational trajectories, it was also employed strategically in this thesis to elicit information and closely monitor my own research practices. This level of reflexivity is common to other studies that involve eliciting and interpreting participants' thoughts and beliefs (Mason, 2002), and is not unique to those where reflexivity is also the object of study (Caetano, 2015b). Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 4, my own reflexivity was used to decide the nature of my role in the research and my ethical responsibilities as the researcher. For research focussed on working with rather than on young people, this meant not focusing on my own reflexivity in ways that would draw attention away from the girls. However, it did include self-disclosure in the form of a life-map that proved an effective way to shift my positioning and evoke points of commonality with the girls. Overall, researcher reflexivity supported my 'listening' across the different information gathered (Guillemin & Drew, 2010) and involved engaging critically with previous and current ways of understanding working-class girls' HE decision making. While knowledge about their educational trajectories can only ever be 'fallible' and known indirectly (M. S. Archer, 2007b), it is through reflexivity that this thesis attempts to make reasonable judgements based on the evidence available.

6.8 Recommendations for Future Research

At the point of undertaking this research, many of the girls were yet to learn whether their proposed applications to high-tariff universities would be successful. Likewise, none knew whether their experiences once there would meet their expectations or be what they had hoped for. Whilst they are young women who can exercise some control in and over their own trajectories through their reflexive decision making in the present, their futures are not predictable nor are they predetermined. Any one of the girls may do things or have things happen that interfere with their proposed engagement with high-tariff universities. It is therefore important that future research in relation to reflexivity builds on this thesis to consider the continuation of high-achieving, working-class girls' journeys beyond sixth form. This might include their journeys into and through the high-tariff universities where they are aspiring to study. However, recognising that reality does not always act according to expectations, it

should also include any diversions in their pathways that take them in unexpected directions.

Without this form of longitudinal research that follows high-achieving, working-class girls' trajectories after they leave compulsory education, it could be assumed that by proposing to engage with high-tariff universities in sixth form they are making 'good choices' that will straightforwardly benefit them in the future (Davies, 2012).

However, this chapter has already made the point that their journeys are not simple stories of turning disadvantage into advantage. As observed in Chapter 5, the girls are not master strategists and although they were taking strategic action in pursuit of university at the time of this study, this is always at the mercy of unforeseen and unforeseeable contingencies (M. S. Archer, 2003). No one would have predicted the advent of a global pandemic in March 2020, only six months after the final interviews were completed. However, it is well-known that the education of students at all levels has been severely disrupted by the impact of COVID-19.

As Pownall, Harris, and Blundell-Birtill (2022) point out, with the interruption to preuniversity study, cancellation of A-level exams and limited preparatory support, the girls in this study are now part of the 'COVID cohort' who may have experienced 'notable challenges' in acclimatising to the university context. Once there, they are likely to have been affected by the pandemic's significant impact on teaching and learning (Pownall et al., 2022), the wider student experience (Montacute & Holt-White, 2021) and potentially a worsening of mental health and well-being (Chen & Lucock, 2022). As the limited research published so far in this area indicates, there is real concern about the growing disparities between working-class young people and their more affluent counterparts as a result of the pandemic (Major, Eyles, & Machin, 2020). They have been more likely to encounter financial constraints, less likely to engage in extra-curricular activities and have higher drop-out rates than their peers (Montacute & Holt-White, 2021). It is important, therefore, that future research relating to high-achieving, working-class girls' educational trajectories considers the way that tensions between constraints and enablements may have been exacerbated as a direct result of the pandemic. Drawing on reflexivity's dynamic

nature, it could also build on the theoretical contribution of this study to show how working-class girls are responding.

6.9 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has brought together the conclusions of the thesis and presented its contributions to knowledge, theory and methodology. It has shown how the thesis identifies a range of structural tensions relating to social class and gender experienced by the high-achieving, working-class girls who generously engaged in the research. However, it has also shown how the girls do not respond to these structural tensions in habitual ways. The chapter emphasises that there is no single, predictable outcome in the educational trajectories of working-class girls and that agency is key to explaining the strategic ways that those in this study approach their university decision making.

Therefore, presented in this research through the exercise of reflexivity, the girls' journeys are not simple stories of how to turn disadvantage into advantage but involve them working deliberately and innovatively with and around structure to achieve their university aims. As this chapter reasserted, the momentum they build through their successful navigation of situations that are progressively discontinuous from those they have previously known is pivotal in driving forward their university goals. Yet so too are the strategic ways that they draw interpersonally on the relationships around them. Making an important theoretical contribution to knowledge, this explanation of the ways in which the girls undertake their university decision making offers a more dynamic understanding of reflexivity than Archer's work provides. However, it is also critical in highlighting the varied concerns that drive their university aims outside of the individualised and economic drivers appointed by neoliberalism.

Consequently, as this chapter has argued, the thesis has important implications for current developments in the WP agenda. It highlights the contradictory complexities of being academically successful that are rarely acknowledged in initiatives intended to support working-class students' attainment and progression. Likewise, it emphasises the need to reframe the outcomes of a university education outside of

only its economic rewards and benefits. These were shown in this chapter to be themes worthy of future research, with further application of Archer's work promising to offer a valuable insight into the complexities of being female and working class whilst at university, and beyond, particularly in a post-pandemic era.

Overall, returning to the aim of this study, the thesis has offered an original explanation for how a small number of working-class girls are making noticeably different educational decisions leading to their proposed application to high-tariff universities. It has made the point that they do not act habitually and nor are their decisions random or deprived of interior control. Rather the high-achieving, working-class girls in this research should be recognised for the notable ways in which they reflexively advance and protect their academic projects in often challenging situations. Above all, like journeys of the girls who first inspired this thesis, their trajectories are continually shaped and reshaped, rather than predetermined.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule (Example – Gaby)

Introduction

- Welcome back
- Explain interview topics and purpose
- Remind of right to withdraw or not answer; confidentiality and anonymity.

Body

➤ **Life-map– (responsive to Gaby’s explanation of this)**

Can you talk me through your timeline?

Looking at it now, is there anything that you would add?

Is there anything you would change?

Family – at start. Who are they? How are they involved in your decisions?

Green smiley face Yr 6

Teachers’ names – [NAMES]

Grades – predicted? Aspirational? Feelings about them?

Sad/bored face - high school

Language symbols – meaning

Other symbols meaning

Scales

Gap year

Cambridge – how do you picture it? reality v. prediction

Concert/London – significance

Red line – University to future – explain

Book – alphabet

Asia – why?

Hammer and briefcase – what do they represent?

TV?

Question marks – significance?

Tell me about your family at the start

➤ **Education**

Tell me about **Primary School**

What types of things happened to make you feel like that? [calls self ‘thick’ in part 1]

Are there any moments or experiences that stand out?

How did you choose your **High School**?

How did you feel when your friends went to [school name]? Was it ever something you considered? Why/not?

What GCSEs did you choose? How did you decide?

What did you like most about school? Least about school?

What made you feel unhappy/bored? [sad face]

➤ **College time**

Did you always want to study A-levels?

Why did you choose your College? How?

How did you choose your A-levels?

Why did you change your choices? Would you change anything now?

What have been your best experiences at College? Why?

What have been your worst?

What motivates you to study/teach yourself?

Were there any times when you wanted to change direction and do something completely different?

How do you feel at College?

➤ **University**

Why did you choose Law? When did you decide to pursue this at university? Who's been involved?

Have you ever had any doubts about university? / Why did you decide not to do an apprenticeship?

How did you make your uni choices?

Why is Manchester your favourite? How will you feel if you don't get the course offer there?

What do you think university life/ course /other students will be like? Do you know other people who've been before?

How have other people reacted to your choice to go?

Is there anything that worries or scares you about university? How do you think you'll manage this?

➤ **Teachers**

Who were they?

Why were they significant?

How did they influence you?

If you hadn't had them, what would be different?

It's interesting that you haven't included any teachers during College, was College different?

➤ **Wider Interests**

Can you tell me a bit more about how you became social media admin?

What is the best part of that?

How do you make decisions when there are several of you involved?

What sparked your interest in Asia? Why does it interest you?

What do you think it will be like to live abroad? What excited you about it?

Is there anything that worries you?

Have you been abroad much before?

Why did you include London?

➤ **Future**

How do you imagine your life in the future?

What is different or the same?

What excites you? Why?

Is there anything that worries you? Why?

What do you think your time at university will be like?

How will you decide what to do afterwards?

Things absent:

➤ **People**

Are there any other people who you want to add to your timeline?

How much do you talk about uni/school with friends?

➤ **Identity**

How would you describe yourself to someone else?

Does that ever change? Or is it different in other places on your timeline?

Why do you think that is?

➤ **Methodology**

What made you decide to take part?

What do you think I could use the findings to do? Is there anything that you think I could use the findings to do for others applying to university?

How did you feel when I first asked you to do the life-map? What were your thoughts about it at the end?

Did you learn anything from it?

Were there any things it made you think about in particular? Were these things you had thought of before?

Would you add or change anything on it now?

Close

We've spoken a lot about the choices you've made, when you have to make big decision, how do you think you go about it?

If I asked you to describe your social class, how would you explain it to me? Does it mean anything to you?

Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think I should know?

Appendix B

Life-Mapping Session Transcript - Example (Estella, Mollie and Neala)

KATHERINE: So have some of you had deadlines this week for UCAS? Have you submitted? [referring to October Oxbridge/medicine deadline]

ESTELLA: Nearly, I think I'm going to do it tonight.

KATHERINE: It's nerve-wracking, isn't it?

ESTELLA: Yeah, at least I'll get it sent over.

KATHERINE: Yeah, it's nice to have it over

ESTELLA: And watch everybody else

KATHERINE: Where have you applied then?

ESTELLA: Liverpool, Queens in Belfast, Leicester and Lancaster for medicine. And then as my backup Edinburgh.

KATHERINE: And what subject for your back up?

ESTELLA: Infectious diseases.

KATHERINE: Oh that's interesting,

ESTELLA: Yeh. I wanted to apply for tropical medicine here but the applying for the same university is a bit risky

KATHERINE: Because they'd know which ones?

ESTELLA: Yeah

KATHERINE: I guess it sounds like a fairly similar course. Great. And do you have a preference as to where you go?

ESTELLA: Either Liverpool or Queens

KATHERINE: And what about you two? Have you applied already? Ah you've both submitted. How did you find writing it?

MOLLIE: It was hard

NEALA: It was alright to begin with but just knowing what to put in and what to take out it was difficult.

KATHERINE: it is, because there's a lot you want to say, isn't there?

ESTELLA: I was one character over

KATHERINE: One character? That's frustrating. Did you get support? Who helped you most? Was it school?

NEALA: A mixture

[pause]

KATHERINE: it's a really long table isn't it

[pause]

KATHERINE: So have you all done quite a lot with the [social enterprise]?

MOLLIE: Quite a bit there

ESTELLA: Mostly workshops

KATHERINE: For personal statements?

MOLLIE: For the careers sectors as well

KATHERINE: Ah, so have you all been placed in a sector related to what you wanted to do? We've got medicine, and was it veterinary? And PPE? Did you have a sector for that one?

MOLLIE: I put down business for mine

KATHERINE: Ok, was that coz there wasn't anything else that linked to it?

MOLLIE: Yeah

KATHERINE: What type of things did you do for the business sector?

MOLLIE: I got put on an internship for JP Morgan. So in the summer I went to London for two weeks.

KATHERINE: oh did you, so you stayed down there? Did they put you up? where did you stay?

MOLLIE: Yeah there was 80 of us so we stayed in the LSE accommodations

KATHERINE: oh great, so it's like a kind of student accommodation down there

MOLLIE: Yeah

KATHERINE: How did you find it at JP Morgan?

MOLLIE: It was really good

KATHERINE: what type of things did you do?

MOLLIE: I was put in asset management and I had like no clue what to do. But then I had, I was put with a mentor and then had to like shadow her desk and do a presentation as well and like had some research to do. And we had were given lots of presentations about like the economy and networking and interview skills and had to do the presentations as well.

KATHERINE: That sounds really good. Did that tempt you to go into anything link to that?

MOLLIE: A bit. Because I wasn't considering applying to that but I really enjoyed that type of thing.

KATHERINE: Did it sway your subject choice for uni at all?

MOLLIE: I was stuck between PPE and just economics but I then prefer PPE more than just economics

KATHERINE: Does it link to what you study at the minute?

MOLLIE: I do economics, maths and biology

KATHERINE: oh wow, I can see how that links to the business, finance side of things. And what about for veterinary science, is there a pathway for that?

NEALA: No, I went on the biology and chemistry but I wasn't able to do the work experience because I was already busy doing work experience for uni. So I was busy at the time they were doing that.

KATHERINE: Where did you do work experience then?

NEALA: Uh different vets. A farm, kennels, a hedgehog sanctuary, and I did a placement at animal rescue in Liverpool but I went back there so I'm going there once a week

KATHERINE: So really varied. How did you get into contact with all those places?

NEALA: Just email, phone, that kind of stuff

KATHERINE: And were they all quite responsive?

NEALA: I must have emailed about 50 different places and you know it just took a while for some of the places to get back and sometimes I didn't get any response out of them

KATHERINE: So you had to be pretty persistent with it

NEALA: Yeah

KATHERINE: Do you know anyone who works in that area already?

NEALA: Not personally, no. Just whoever I've met through my work experience.

KATHERINE: Wow, what made you want to do veterinary science then?

NEALA: I love animals and I love learning about them. I think they're fascinating to study.

KATHERINE: Is there any area of animals that you want to specialise in?

NEALA: Exotics

KATHERINE: Ah that's why you're drawing a reptile sanctuary!

NEALA: Yeah

KATHERINE: That's interesting, I know nothing about exotics at all. Do you have animals yourself?

NEALA: Just a dog. My mum won't let me keep any snakes.

KATHERINE: maybe at university! So where have you applied to? Liverpool does it?

NEALA: Yeah. Liverpool, Bristol, Edinburgh and the Royal Veterinary College down in London and I've also applied for a zoology with herpetology course Bangor

KATHERINE: And do you have a preference?

NEALA: Edinburgh, coz they do lot with exotics. They have a hospital just for exotics and they do a lot up there

KATHERINE: So you'd be able to specialise in that. Have you been up to visit?

NEALA: yeah

KATHERINE: Was that just yourself?

NEALA: Yeah just myself looking at the open day

KATHERINE: oh that sounds interesting. I wouldn't know much about which universities specialist in different things. What made you interested in the exotics?

NEALA: I think just the fascination of how people, how more people are owning reptiles an that kind of thing. And how like, I just think they are fascinating creatures because they are so different from a typical a dog or cat

KATHERINE: yeah and how they're development so differently from any other species and that

NEALA: Yeah, it's really interesting

KATHERINE: That's great

[pause]

KATHERINE: Have you done work experience E? Where did you do it?

ESTELLA: At the Royal, Aintree, Arrow Park and X. It was really interesting.

KATHERINE: How did you arrange it?

ESTELLA: There's like the mentor-mentee system so my mentor's like a doctor and I met her here and she helped me get some more experience as well.

KATHERINE: oh, what type of doctor is your mentor?

ESTELLA: She's just finished training in the Royal and I think she's going into paediatrics now

KATHERINE: So that's been a really good link in for you. Did you have to contact places yourself?

ESTELLA: uh only for one of them. Because my school helped me with one of them as well. Because one of my classmate's parents are doctors.

KATHERINE: That's very convenient, a good link in. Is any of your family doctors or involved in medicine?

ESTELLA: No, quite a lot of people in my school want to study medicine

KATHERINE: Is it quite, do most of your friends want to go to university and that?

ESTELLA: Yeah, most of them

KATHERINE: So school's kind of set up for people looking at that type of thing

ESTELLA: Yeah, the aim is pretty much for everyone to go to university, although not everybody does

KATHERINE: Yeah, so what type of things do they do at school to get you to go to university

ESTELLA: Well in year 12 there's like enrichment so every Wednesday afternoon they get speakers or representatives from universities coming to talk about universities or how to write CVs and that. Yeah that was.

KATHERINE: Yeah, so that's pretty regular for you

ESTELLA: It was regular in Year 12 but not so much in Year 13 because you already know what you are going to do, mostly

KATHERINE: Yeah, most people know. And I guess you have a new focus with the exams and that. Were you in just in Sixth Form in your school or did you

ESTELLA: I was there in Year 7, 10, 11 , 12

KATHERINE: Have they always promoted going to university?

ESTELLA: Pretty much.

KATHERINE: What about in Sixth Form is it similar? Do they promote university or do people go to all different places?

MOLLIE: They promote university a lot

NEALA: It's sort of one of their things that you have to apply UCAS so everyone applies to UCAS and sends of a form even if they're not interested in university because they've had a lot of cases where people who don't do UCAS application in their first year and then in their second year want to go to university but it's too late by that stage. But they do promote apprenticeships as well.

KATHERINE: And do you think most people end up going to university

NEALA: Yeah definitely, yeah

KATHERINE: So it's quite a strong pathway. And do people come from all sorts of different schools before they come to your sixth form?

MOLLIE: yeah quite a lot of them, Liverpool and then the Wirral as well.

NEALA: There's some people from Chester too.

KATHERINE: Wow that's a long way to come. Is that because it's got a good reputation?

MOLLIE: Yeah

KATHERINE: Have you always wanted to go to university

MOLLIE & NEALA: yeah

ESTELLA: Are we going to explain this to you?

KATHERINE: That's ok, yeah. What I'm going to do is, what I'd like to do is to invite you back individually to explain at a different time because there's three of you now and it will probably take ages for you all to talk me through them. I'll get you to come back and talk me through it and I'll get you to explain the things I don't understand. Because you're right like if you look at mine, you wouldn't understand what some of it meant if I didn't talk you through it. So I'll send you another email and find a date when's best for you to come back and talk me through it if that's alright.

[pause]

KATHERINE: What are you all looking forward to most about university?

MOLLIE: Moving away

KATHERINE: Moving away from, living independently or a different city?

MOLLIE: Just a different city

KATHERINE: Where did you say is your favourite?

MOLLIE: Oxford, York Southampton, Hull

KATHERINE: Oxford, York, Southampton, Hull, so kind of all different corners of the country. And what's your favourites?

MOLLIE: Oxford

KATHERINE: Yeah. And you've been down to visit Oxford? Did you go with the [social enterprise]?

MOLLIE: No I went on a summer school there

KATHERINE: Ah great. What did you do on the summer school?

MOLLIE: PPE

KATHERINE: Ah was that the summer just gone? So you did JP Morgan and the summer school? Did you do anything else?

MOLLIE: I went to Kings College to do a summer school as well

KATHERINE: Did you? That's brilliant. How come you did so much.

MOLLIE: I just applied to lots

KATHERINE: And you got them all?

MOLLIE: Yeah

KATHERINE: And were you going to apply to Oxford before you did the summer school?

MOLLIE: No, I didn't think that I'd be able to get in but then going there I thought I'd just try it

KATHERINE: What changed your mind in particular?

MOLLIE: I think just being there

KATHERINE: And did you, you had to apply for a particular college?

MOLLIE: Yeah I applied to Worcester because that's the one I stayed in when I went down

KATHERINE: Ah is Worcester a traditional college, an old building and that?

MOLLIE: It's kind of mixed, it's one of the bigger ones and it has its own lake

KATHERINE: its got its own lake! Is it in the city centre then or is it outside if it has a lake?

MOLLIE: it's like right by train station so it's near the city centre

KATHERINE: Ah that's perfect. So what things did you do on the summer school? Was it lessons?

MOLLIE: It was 18 hours of lectures in five days but then in the evenings it was going round Oxford and then getting to know different places it was just stuff like that

KATHERINE: So you can get a feel for the city as well?

MOLLIE: yeah and then lots of stuff about admissions stuff as well

KATHERINE: So did they talk you through the process?

MOLLIE: Yeah, there's like an online platform that they have for it that like goes through everything as well

KATHERINE: Oh is there. How helpful was that?

MOLLIE: Really helpful

KATHERINE: Was that something that convinced you that you could do it?

MOLLIE: Yeah

KATHERINE: And did they have former students as well?

MOLLIE: Yeah all the ambassadors were either first years or like third years

KATHERINE: So you got to ask the questions and things

MOLLIE: Yeah

KATHERINE: Was that the first time you had met someone who had been there

MOLLIE: I don't know if I people personally that had but I hadn't sat down and asked them questions and things

KATHERINE: yeah, it's not what you do unless you're in that context. Oh so that's nice, Oxford is a nice city I've been there a couple of times. And York was it? Have you been to York?

MOLLIE: No, I haven't been to any of the places I've applied to

KATHERINE: Oh, what's tempted you to apply for them then?

MOLLIE: They just look nice!

KATHERINE: Well, York is a nice place! I've been to York it's nice. But you didn't apply to Kings College then.

MOLLIE: No, I didn't really like it when I went.

KATHERINE: Was it the uni or London?

MOLLIE: No London was the main thing, it's too busy

KATHERINE: oh well that's quite good. It's good that you went and knew that you didn't like it. That's sometimes as helpful. You can kind of cross that one off then. So you did loads over the summer. You must have been quite prepared when you came back to do your statements and things like that. And did you meet there, did you meet other people who come from all over the country?

MOLLIE: Yeah, I've got a couple of friends who live in Scotland so I'm planning to go up.

KATHERINE: Oh brilliant. And are any of those applying as well.

MOLLIE: I don't think so.

KATHERINE: So you do really get to meet people from all over. Did any of you do summer schools? What about you [Estella]?

ESTELLA: I was doing work experience

KATHERINE: And you probably did work experience?

NEALA: Yeah

[pause]

KATHERINE: How are you doing? The other bit to think about is if you want to do the future there are those little people there. Things to think about are education, housing work, it could be family, friends or anything else that you hope for in the future. It might be that you don't know what you want in the future either or you might know.

[pause]

ESTELLA: I think I'm done but I don't know if there's anything that I've missed out

KATHERINE: That's ok, it when you come back there's anything else you want to add, or if you want to bring photos, objects or anything that will explain it better you can do

Appendix C

Interview Transcript – Example Extract (Gaby)

KATHERINE: So, do you want to talk me through? You can start from the beginning or you can start elsewhere if you'd rather.

GABY: Right, so I was born [...]

KATHERINE: Yeah, in 2000?

GABY: Yeah in 2000. And then [...] uh so I only live with my mum and my sister. And my sister moved out so it's just like my mum and me now

KATHERINE: And are you the younger one on this?

GABY: Yeah.

KATHERINE: How old's your sister? Is she much older?

GABY: Good question, she's twenty... seven or eight? I'm not sure, I think twenty-eight

KATHERINE: Ok, yeah. So about ten years older than you?

GABY: Yeah, I think she's ten year older. She was ten when I was born.

KATHERINE: Does she go to uni or anything?

GABY: Er no, she's got a job now. She's a receptionist. But um no, she didn't go uni. She didn't even go college. That's like, no one in my family's been to uni. And that's all.

KATHERINE: So are you similar to your sister or different?

GABY: No, completely different. She was quite bad at school. And like, she's always been quite bad, but I'm like completely the opposite. And like, she's just, uh. We're completely different. We get on now, like we never used to get on like when I was

that age, we didn't get on. I used to wind her up, but now that she's, she had a baby like three years ago. So like, since she's had my nephew we get on really well now. Um.

KATHERINE: When you say she was bad, do you mean bad like naughty or bad not very academic.

GABY: Oh just bad! Like she's so like, she's, she was bad at school, she loved school but she was bad at school. And then, she was like, do you know like the teenagers that are like on the streets? She's one of them. So like, she stressed my mum out a lot whereas like with me it's completely different. And my mum's like with her, my mum was like 'don't go out, stay in' and my sister was like 'no, I'm going out', whereas with me my mum's like 'go out' and I'm like 'no, I'm staying in'

KATHERINE: Two very different children she's got there!

GABY: And then, yeah, I don't remember much of that.

KATHERINE: What does your sister think of that? Does she think you're completely different to her?

GABY: Yeah, she's literally, like she always says 'you are not my sister'. So we're like that different. Like my cousin's a lot more like she is and she's always saying 'she should have been my sister' coz we're so different but um I think my mum's really glad that I am the way I am because they caused her a lot of stress. Like, they're good now but back then she was really bad. Um, and then. I went to primary. Um primary, I really liked primary, um then, but like, I think I told you in the last one, up until about Year 6 I was not smart at all. I didn't, I was very average, if not below, in like all of those tests and things. And then when I got into Year 6, I had my teacher which was Miss [NAME] that I put down. She was very like kind of encouraging, like quite motivating, not just to me but to everyone in that year so she was like 'you can all do well' and like everyone, we all really liked her. So, it was like we want to do really well for her, so everyone worked really hard in Year 6 and we all did pretty well in our exams.

KATHERINE: Is that what the smiley face is for?

GABY: Yeah

KATHERINE: So that was Mrs [NAME], so like what type of things did she do to encourage you?

GABY: Well when I was in Year 5, because I think I told you as well, I had like three best friends in primary and they were all like [SCHOOL NAME] kids and they did like really well at school and whereas I was I was like the thick one in the group

KATHERINE: What made you feel like, you kept saying that last time, what was it that made you feel like that?

GABY: I just, I was just like quite average in comparison to like the others and like even my mum thought at one point like she thought I was disabled. Like coz she thought for the longest time that I had something wrong with me because I was just a bit slow, which I still am, but now we get like decent grades. [...] But I don't know, I think it might have been just a confidence thing to be honest because that was something they always said like when I got to Year 6 I got a bit more confident and then did better in my exams. But then when I was in Year 5 I had like a really bad teacher and um the three friends that I was on about the teacher used to give them like books to read, and um like proper like novels, and like I was like 'oh I wanna read one that's not fair, I wanna have a go' so she gave me Little Women to read, she was like 'I don't think you can do this' so like that was like another thing I was just like ok then but

KATHERINE: That must have been hard

GABY: Yeah, but Miss [NAME] wasn't like that, she would be like 'go on you can do it, read it' that kind of thing

KATHERINE: So it was a change of confidence from the teachers?

GABY: Yeah

KATHERINE: And how did you feel, because you said your friends were all applying to [SCHOOL NAME] and did you apply to [SCHOOL NAME] or not?

GABY: No, I wasn't allowed. Because they only let the ones who got the best like did the best apply. So there was like I think there was like four students who applied.

KATHERINE: How did that make you feel?

GABY: Not like I wasn't too bothered at that time. Now I think back I'm like, now that I went to high school and I went to the high school I did, I'm like I wish I went to [SCHOOL NAME]. And now that I know I can do well, I'd have liked to have been able to have a go at the exam and like see if I could get in. I mean, joke's on them coz I think like only one of them got in anyway so

KATHERINE: oh really.

GABY: So it's fine but

KATHERINE: And did they go to high school with you in the end?

GABY: No they went to a different one. Yeah. They um, it was quite split our school, because we've got quite a lot of high schools around us so it was quite split where people went. So like my, the high school that I went to was like the best one out of the ones around me. It's a good school because there's like a lot worse ones around me but it's still like a state school, so still not [SCHOOL NAME].

KATHERINE: What's different about [SCHOOL NAME], like what do you think you get from [SCHOOL NAME]?

GABY: They had a lot more like, they were like pushed a lot more with like their subjects and things. Like they did like Latin, and it's like, yeah, and it's like, we did Spanish and French, which we all dropped at like Year 9. But like so they were pushed a lot more and it was like I think everyone there was smart so it was like everyone got good grades so everyone tried at school. Whereas like my school's like maybe you've got about ten in a class who try and the rest just don't. And like it's really like distracting.

KATHERINE: Do you think it's like, what is it that makes [SCHOOL NAME] students different? You know your teacher said, the three people who applied was it just their grades that made the difference?

GABY: I think it was their grades and I think it was the grades and their confidence. They were a lot more confident like. When I was, so my school, my primary school was really weird it was like you had Reception and then you had Year 1 as well but the so like everyone say my age was in Reception and then you'd have obviously the year above but in one of the Year 1 classes about five students from Reception ended up in the Year 1 classes. But they like still stayed in there, they did two years, they just didn't have reception with us. And instead they were like kind of with the older ones and all the [SCHOOL NAME] kids they were in that one. And um but I was supposed to go into that. Because at one point, I think in like nursery and in reception, I was, I was smart at that point and then it just dipped. But they said to my mum, they were like 'oh we want to put her in there but she's not confident enough so we're going to keep her in that one' and I think maybe if I'd gone in that one maybe I'd be at [SCHOOL NAME] now.

KATHERINE: That's interesting that at such a young age it can make a difference.

GABY: It's weird

KATHERINE: And then, so you went, coz you said last time you got really good grades at Year 6 and then went to high school with those grades?

GABY: So um, I got like all level, like I think level 4's average and I got all level 5s in it

KATHERINE: Oh wow

GABY: Yeah it was a shock for everyone.

KATHERINE: That's really good

GABY: Yeah

KATHERINE: Were you pleased with them?

GABY: yeah oh I was really pleased. Honestly, I did more revision then than I do now. Like it's bad. But um, I was really stressed about my exams, that's something I've always been stressed at. It gets a lot worse, a lot worse at high school. Um, but yeah when I coz I got them grades I was able to, I think we had like, maybe like ten sets in my year.

KATHERINE: Oh wow, so it's like a really big year group?

GABY: You'd think but it's like, there was like two hundred and about two hundred and fifty so it's like normal size school but there was about ten, nine or ten sets, and you had, it is bad, you had like the higher end and like the lower end and like everyone knew that the lower one were like the thick ones. That's what everyone said. And you had the higher end so I ended up in like the third from the top in like the higher end um which even that wasn't good enough because my set was like still quite loud, you had to like be in set one or two to have like the really quiet class. Whereas mine was like people who were clever but still like didn't try at it. But I was in that like throughout like high school I kind of like sometimes each year moved up in like a couple of subjects every now and then um but I like I was pretty like on target the whole of high school I think.

KATHERINE: And did you enjoy being in the set you were in or did you want to move up?

GABY: I liked it coz I had like, I made my friends like in there. But then like, like I would have rather been in a higher set. They messed it up to be honest coz like say like my best friend now, she um, she's like pretty much like the same intelligence as I am at school and she got like the exact same SATs grades as I did but she was put in like a really low set in Year 7. Yeah, coz they did it with quite a few students, they completely messed it all up. And um there was a lot of parents that were like 'I want my kids moving up'. So there was a lot of that going on coz like when we got to about Year 10 she was in all of my classes. Coz they realised, oh who should be up there. So I, I would've liked to have been in a higher set I think, coz they, especially

when you got to the top set they were all like really, they really worked hard um and, I like, the ones in my class really weren't like that. Um, and then yeah I hated school, I really hated school.

KATHERINE: What did you hate about it? I was, is that a hating face is it? And that?

GABY: And that's like tired, boring. I just found it really boring.

KATHERINE: What happened to make you feel bored.

GABY: I think it's, and it's the same with college like, I do not have the best teachers. And um, I think it's like a lot of the time, coz I use a lot of like YouTube like for revision and things like that and there's a lot of things I can use outside of school to do the work, it's kind of a case of like 'why am I here?' coz it's like I could teach myself better. Coz I like, I have to teach myself anyway coz none of it goes in at school or college, so it's like might as well just not be here. But so that was like a lot of high school was like that. And I was also, I had like, I had really bad anxiety in high school, well it's like, that started at primary like even when I did my year er what was it? Like Year 2 SATs I like literally sobbed and sobbed for like weeks because I didn't want to do them because I was so panic-y about them but it was like literally like exams when I was like 8. And then um, that was like the same for my SATs as well and then high school was like ok for assessments and things and I was ok until I got to like Year 10 and I um had an exam, like an earlier exam in the January, it was the first proper like GCSE one that I was sitting um and like that was a mess coz I was like so anxious about it. So um that was horrendous for the whole of like GCSEs

KATHERINE: Why do you think that was worse than the others?

GABY: What do you mean?

KATHERINE: Do you think, was it because of the pressure of the GCSEs?

GABY: I don't know to be honest, like it is like, coz I have quite a lot of anxiety anyway but then it's quite heightened by exams. And I think it's coz these ones there was quite a lot of pressure put on me for them, um, like my family put quite a bit of

pressure on me. But then like when they saw how it affected my they were like 'oh ok just do as well as you can', which is like how they are now. But yeah like that was not fun at all.

[...]

Appendix D

Inductive Coding Using *Nvivo 12*

Examples of codes generated from the data and managed in the QDAS *NVivo 12*.

Codes

	Name	Files	Reference
+ ○	Academic friendship group	7	9
+ ○	Academic identity	0	0
○	Acting as a role model for others	2	3
○	Age as barrier to work experience	3	6
○	Animals as hobby has increased confidence	3	3
○	Becoming more aware about social justice issues	4	6
○	Being organised helps balance work, study, freetim	2	2
○	Choosing GCSEs or A-levels she is good at	4	4
○	Choosing hanging out with friends over revision (G	2	2
+ ○	Choosing UCAS options	2	2
+ ○	Comparing self to others	5	6
+ ○	Confident child	2	3
+ ○	Contextual Offer	0	0
○	Coursework is a good safety net	1	1
○	Deciding on job by trying out	1	1
+ ○	Decisions based on future	3	3
○	Degree choice linked to family experience	2	2
○	Delegating extra-curricular work to others	1	1
○	Depersonalising failure - blaming exam not self	1	1
○	Detailed understanding of university grade offers	1	1
+ ○	Determination to succeed	1	1
+ ○	Different from family	2	3
+ ○	Enjoying and engaging in learning	16	24
○	falling into subject choice - A-levels	3	3
○	Falling out with friends makes her unhappy (primar	3	4
○	False sense of security about hardwork	1	1
+ ○	Financial cost as factor in uni decision	10	14
+ ○	Fitting in (academically)	0	0
+ ○	Freedom to make own decisions- self-determinatio	5	7

Example of a single code within NVivo 12 and access to where this was located in different parts of the data.

The screenshot shows the NVivo 12 interface for a code named 'Seizing opportunities'. The browser address bar indicates the file path: C:/Users/kathd/Desktop/Seizing%20opportunities.html. The interface includes tabs for 'SUMMARY', 'TEXT', and 'PICTURE', with 'TEXT' currently selected. Below the 'Overview' section, there is a table with columns 'TYPE' and 'Code'. The 'Content' section is further divided into 'Text' and 'Picture' sub-sections, each with its own table.

Text Content Table:

FILE & LOCATION	REFERENCES	COVERAGE	
Files\Interviews\Becky Interview	3	4.87%	view details
Files\Interviews\Haley Interview	2	2.17%	view details
Files\Interviews\Claire Interview	1	1.23%	view details
Files\Interviews\Amelia Interview	1	1.27%	view details
Files\Interviews\Gaby - Interview	1	1.06%	view details

Picture Content Table:

FILE & LOCATION	REFERENCES	COVERAGE	
Files\Life-maps\Becky LM	1	0.62%	view details
Files\Life-maps\Leah LM	1	3.52%	view details

Details of the code, above, identified within Claire's interview.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with a single tab titled 'Claire Interview'. The address bar shows the file path: 'C:/Users/kathd/Desktop/Seizing%20opportunities/3.html'. The main content area displays the title 'Seizing opportunities' and the NVIVO logo. Below the title are three tabs: 'SUMMARY', 'TEXT', and 'PICTURE', with 'TEXT' selected. Under the 'Text' tab, there is a 'Text' section containing a carousel of five document thumbnails. The thumbnails are labeled 'Becky Interview', 'Haley Interview', 'Claire Interview', 'Amelia Interview', and 'Gaby - Interview'. The 'Claire Interview' thumbnail is highlighted with a grey border and is labeled '3 of 5'. Below the carousel is a 'References' section with a table containing one entry.

REF NO.	COVERAGE	CONTENT
1	1.23%	CLAIRE: I think, well, again like, I look back to like when I was there or there and I think, like, I definitely think there were things I could have done back then, um, like different kind of decisions I've made and so ever since then, when I've been set with like a new opportunity, I've kind of tried to do things differently and kind of see, well that didn't work then so we're going to change it for this time, and see if it worked a bit better. So in a way, like, I don't regret those things because it has kind of like taught me how to do things a bit differently. And I think, like, just, definitely GCSEs and things like that and NCS were really good for confidence. Because I'm not the most confident person in the entire world but like, I think, there's loads of sort of like new opportunities that I've been given here and I've tried my best to sort of, rather than like, oh I'm too afraid to at least to try, to try and be like if I don't do it then it's going to keep being scary and that will never go away so I've got to take things.

Example of the code, above, identified in Becky's life-map.

Becky LM

File | C:/Users/kathd/Desktop/Seizing%20opportunities/4.html

Seizing opportunities

SUMMARY TEXT **PICTURE** NVIVO

Picture



Becky LM
1 of 2



Leah LM
2 of 2



0 400 800 1200 1600 2000 2400 2800 3200 3600

0 300 600 900 1200 1500 1800 2100 2400

Image References

NO.	REGION	COVERAGE
1	1400,1030 - 1690,1250	0.62%

Appendix E

Theoretically Informed Coding Using Modes of Reflexivity – Example (Freya)

Example of tables developed for each girl as part of the process of identifying themes and patterns following the theoretically informed coding of transcripts for reflexivity.

Freya				
Autonomous	Communicative	Meta	Fractured	Mixed/Other Notes
<p>No-one had high expectations of her grades at GCSE. She would have been 'scared off' if they did, but instead feels she's got 'nothing to lose' in revising for the exams. She has the freedom/is free from risks to try to break with expectations. - later describes how achieving high grades was a moment of realising she could do</p>	<p>Has lived in the same house her whole life: contextual continuity (says she complains about this but does like it).</p> <p>Liked the people and small size of primary school.</p> <p>Does not like the change to secondary school – split over two</p>		<p>Describes how she overthinks and gets very upset after exams (academic & piano) – thinks she has failed. E.g. worries her dad has wasted 50 quid on exam.</p> <p>Internalising thoughts.</p>	<p>Not getting good grades in primary school – leads to low target grades in secondary school. Not expected to be very good but 'became like really academic' – now at A-level everyone expects her to do well.</p> <p>In bottom sets – achieves higher grades than she is expected to at GCSE.</p>

<p><i>whatever she wanted in future.</i></p> <p>Initially 'just ploughs through' in bottom set, but realises <i>she will need to work hard to 'get out of this set' and is able to move up sets when she starts upper school</i> (still not top but 'better than what it was before')</p> <p><i>'marshalled her inner resources' Archer 2007 p.194/201</i></p> <p>Parents give her the <i>freedom to make her own subject choices at GCSE</i> (compares this to her friends whose didn't). She chooses triple science.</p>	<p>sites, with 250 children in a year.</p> <p>Secondary school choice: her brother went there and it is the feeder school for her primary. <i>It was nice to know he'd been there first. Continuous context.</i></p> <p>Sticks with the school even though she doesn't really like it until Year 9.</p> <p>Didn't like the amount of people in high school. Wants to learn but is in the bottom set with people who do not want to learn. <i>No similar/familiars?</i></p>			<p>Thinks SATs are a bit cruel and put to much pressure on children at young age.</p> <p>Considering a uni with contextual offer – grades are quite high for economics. (safety net).</p> <p>Interest in economics linked to family's experience of dad's struggle for work during economic crash – he had to move to Germany for work.</p> <p>Dad doesn't really like banking and stuff (because of his experience during credit crunch) but is nevertheless supportive of her career choice. She has</p>
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<p>Freedom allows her to choose subjects she likes, with future focus – at the time she wanted to go into medicine.</p> <p>She does very well in GCSEs despite not expecting to. Doesn't believe her grades initially! Is very pleased with them.</p> <p><i>Moment of contextual discontinuity – realises she can rely on own resources. / Positive reinforcement loop from working hard to satisfaction.</i></p> <p>All her teachers tell her they knew she would do well but she hadn't believed them until she got the grades.</p>	<p>All her friends got better SAT results and are in a higher set – forced to be more independent?</p> <p>Learns the piano from aged 7 or 8 – wanting to do this because of friend and cousin.</p> <p>A new teacher transforms her perception of English, which she has hated all through school, 'turns it all around' in the last sixth months before GCSE.</p> <p>Nearly takes English A-level as a result, but weighs up her options and decides it won't help her in the end so she doesn't. Strategic-</p>			<p>the freedom to pursue this.</p> <p>Describes realising that having seen her mum and brother graduate and succeed at uni makes her realise she can also do it – describes this as “almost like a comfort blanket”</p> <p>Her school is situated in close proximity to three private schools – but is proud that she got the same grades as others who pay for their education. Links it to the hard work she put in.</p> <p>Wants to have money and lifestyle she hasn't had growing up, but wouldn't send her own</p>
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<p><i>Needed for self-reliance.</i></p> <p>She is the only one among her friends who was predicted lower grades. Contrasts herself to other friends who had done well in SATs and been predicted higher grades.</p> <p>She worked really hard to achieve her grades. Positive reinforcement loop – time and self are invested in achieving grades despite internal/external expectations of not achieving highly. Derives satisfaction from achieving the grades.</p>	<p>not based on other people.</p> <p>F describes how it is hard not to get swept along when rest of class is messing around. However, she was aware that she still studied at home to catch-up with the work – strategic ‘circumventing obstacles’ (p.215).</p> <p>Wary of taking A-level physics because of the grade, but speaks to Head of Physics to check. Takes the A-level as a result of his assurance.</p> <p>Stayed in same school for sixth form, but</p>			<p>children to private school</p> <p>Student loan not really her money – everyone should get the same in terms of education.</p>
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<p>The change from GCSE maths to A-level maths is a big jump (discontinuity) that she isn't initially prepared for.</p> <p>She has been used to being top of a lower set and feeling very comfortable with the work. The change to not always being top and being unfamiliar with the new topics is very difficult. It really hits her and she doesn't like it for the first three weeks.</p> <p>Mum encourages her to stick with it – so she does.</p> <p>Fights with mum about wanting the support of a tutor, mum refuses because of cost.</p>	<p>regrets not moving to take Music A-level (her school doesn't offer it because it's underfunded).</p> <p>Ideal was to do music, but replaced this with chemistry which has grown on her.</p> <p>Regrets not having looked at other sixth form choices.</p> <p>Describes herself as being in her comfort zone at the school, where everyone knows and will help her.</p> <p>Also says she doesn't really regret it too much – is happy with where she now is.</p> <p>Plans to continue piano playing as a nice 'comfort blanket'</p>			
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<p>Sticks with it and achieved an A-grade on mock. Realises she can rely on herself. 'I did it myself', 'like, I can actually do it'.</p> <p>Beginning to feel more confident with A-level subjects.</p> <p><i>Later describes as a turning point in realising she can do things by herself.</i></p> <p>Work experience in hospital rules out doing something medical in the future – it's not even a choice anymore. Acquiring new experiences – not wanting to have to see patients in pain.</p> <p>Interested in banking – is looking forward to the opportunity to do</p>				
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<p>placement – prompted to apply for this by someone from social enterprise scheme.</p> <p>Supplements what she knows by finding out for herself (not relying on similar/familiars to tell her).</p> <p>Help organising this from social enterprise.</p> <p>Strategic use of enablements available to her.</p> <p>Wants to do economics at university – has found out about it from maths teacher who says most friends went onto banking and are much better paid.</p> <p>Supplements incomplete information from teachers – outside of close</p>				
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<p>context of family/friends.</p> <p>Has a mentor from an investment bank who gives her guidance and puts her onto different opportunities – e.g. different routes into this career. Mentor is another enablement that she uses strategically to support future plans.</p> <p>Mentor is the first person she really knows who has given her an insight into banking and economics. It's been good to hear first-hand from her. <i>Needing to rely on those outside her close/natal context to supplement</i></p>				
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<p>information as they don't have it to share.</p> <p>Has limits in her autonomous reflexivity – does not want the intense/high-pressured environment of UCL/LSE</p> <p>Desire to travel after A-levels and acquire new experiences. But with limits – scared she won't come back for university if she has a gap year.</p> <p>Mum very recently graduated with a degree – first in family to do so. She is inspired by this – if her mum can do it, she thinks she definitely can. Contextual continuity broken by</p>				
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<p>mum (makes her more confident in going to uni when has seen her mum manage this before her)..</p> <p>But: Keeps her own studies quite separate from her mum's 'I like to do it by myself type of thing'</p> <p>Decides against an apprenticeship so as not to be stuck to one thing. She would have more freedom in choices after uni if she does a degree.</p> <p>Hoping to take CSI exam to put on personal statement (although it is quite expensive) – says it is</p>				
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<p>good opportunity to do while still a student.</p> <p>Proactive – relies on own resources to revise, and seeking out ways to circumvent the financial cost of the exam – has approached the school and the social enterprise.</p> <p>Proactive in seeking to gain skills and experience to support her personal statement. One week through school and the second two weeks 'off her own back'.</p> <p>Only one in her school to get onto the social enterprise scheme.</p>				
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<p>Brother had similar pathway to her – not doing as well at school then achieving highly later on. sees his achievement before her as a comfort blanket.</p> <p>Explains how she is self-reliant when under pressure: she 'gets her head down' and gets on with it. E.g. going to school to study on Saturdays</p> <p>Has a job and has had to learn to be more strategic and self-reliant/organised in order to successfully balance it with studies.</p> <p>Enjoys the independence gained through the job – being</p>				
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<p>able to buy things with her own money. But also sees it as rewarding and contributing to her future – positive reinforcement loop.</p> <p>Likes having a job “<i>I’m my own person and I’m individual, independent</i>” – not having to ask mum for money.</p> <p>Looking forward to moving away and living on her own – but still scared about aspects of this such as not knowing anyone. It’s daunting not knowing anyone else who is doing her course. Balances her fears with the opportunities that university will open</p>				
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<p>up for her when she is there.</p> <p>Compares herself to some of her friends who want to stay in home city and describes herself as wanting to 'try something different'</p> <p>She likes to be quite independent – which is why she got a p/t job – and sees university as the next natural step in progressing this. Couldn't justify living away from home if she were to stay in home city (due to all the money she could be saving)</p> <p>Wanting to travel and work abroad (in big city as contrast to current</p>				
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<p>life) – some continuity from what parents did in the past but never experienced herself.</p> <p>Aims to get a job in New York but recognises the challenges – has broad plans to circumvent these through internships while at university.</p> <p>Not certain how she will get to working in New York but sees getting her degree and then a job as ways to make this easier and gain a link in – these are enablements for her future.</p> <p>Having a family herself in the future is secondary to having a</p>				
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<p>career first. Will only have her own family once she has achieved what she wants to do career-wise. Explains how this is quite different to other people and especially different to the 'olden days'</p> <p><i>"if I was like to settle down I don't think I'd be happy knowing that I haven't got what I want for me"</i></p> <p>Wouldn't mind moving back to her home city but thinks she could end up anywhere.</p> <p>Achievement at GCSEs is the most significant thing for F – a 'turning point' <i>"Like I didn't think I was going to do that well and then</i></p>				
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<p><i>once I did it was like, whoah, like I could actually do whatever I wanted to do”</i></p> <p>Getting through A-levels on her own is also very significant.</p> <p>Recognises that she will need the independence she has learned during A-levels when she moves to university.</p> <p>Speaks to her mum to process her thoughts out loud, but doesn't take on advice.</p> <p>Doesn't see why should would take advice from others on things that are only going to affect her.</p>				
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<p>Seeks others' opinions but describes how she doesn't really take them to heart because she already thinks in her head what she wants to do. Likes to set thoughts straight in own head before verbalising them.</p> <p>Recognises her subject choices are quite male-dominated but describes herself as strong-minded in this situation. She wants to do it anyway.</p> <p><i>"but I think that when I tell anyone, everyone's like oh, physics, and I'm like yeah physics and what?"</i></p> <p>Doesn't think gender should affect banking but recognises it is not</p>				
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<p>there yet. Still determined to pursue this path. <i>“but it’s what I want to do, so I don’t know why gender should affect it”</i>,</p> <p>Her decisions don’t feel like decisions because she’s always been focussing on the next step (discontinuity).</p> <p>Advises others to do the same.</p> <p>Recognises school has been a comfort zone and she is ready to take the next step. She is excited for what comes next. She feels she has got the most out of school that she can. It feels like it’s been a long journey.</p>				
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Appendix F

Participant Information Sheet

My name is Katherine Davey and I am conducting this research as a part-time student on the Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme in the School of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study that provides the focus for my EdD thesis.

Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information.

Study Title: University decision-making among high-achieving girls from working-class backgrounds.

What is the study about?

The purpose of this study is to investigate how female students, like you, make decisions about their education. It will explore why you and the other participants are choosing to apply to university and the different factors that affect or influence your decision-making.

Why have I been invited to take part?

I have invited you to take part because the study requires information from female students in Years 12 and 13 who are predicted high A-level grades and are planning to go to university.

You have been approached because you come from a 'working-class' background. For this research, this means that you may be the first generation in your family to go to university

and/or may live in an area where fewer students than average go to university and/or may have been eligible for free school meals.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide. If you agree to take part I will ask you to sign a consent form to show you agree to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you agree to take part, you will be invited to participate in a small focus group and an individual interview, which will both be audio recorded. The focus group will involve taking part in a creative activity about yourself with two or three other students in the group. The interview will take place with me. Overall, this should take no more than four hours of your time.

Will information or data about me be identifiable?

All information collected will be securely stored and only my supervisor and I, the researcher, will have access to it. The information will be anonymised before the data is presented in the research. This means that I will not use your real name or any details about you that could identify who you are.

Audio recordings will be deleted once the thesis has been written and submitted for examination.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The results of this research will be summarised and presented in my thesis. They may be submitted for publication in an academic or professional journal. If you would like a copy of my thesis or any publications, please contact me using the details below.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

Although you may find participating interesting, there are no direct benefits from taking part.

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?

There are no foreseeable disadvantages to you taking part in the study. If you are unhappy or have further questions at any stage, you can speak to either me or my supervisor. Our details are below.

Who has approved the study?

The study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education and Professional Development Ethics Committee at the University of Huddersfield.

Where can I obtain further information about the study if I need it?

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me or my supervisor. Our details are below.

Thank you for taking time to read this.

Contact Details

School of Education and Professional Development, University of Huddersfield

Researcher

Katherine Davey; Katherine.Davey2@hud.ac.uk

0151 252 3120 / 07779818489

Supervisor

Dr Lisa Russell; l.russell@hud.ac.uk

01484 478272

Appendix G

Consent Form

Study Title: University decision-making among high-achieving girls from working-class backgrounds.

Researcher: Katherine Davey; Katherine.davey2@hud.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Lisa Russell; l.russell@hud.ac.uk

- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet related to this research.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions and I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor for further information at any point during the study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that I will be audio recorded during the focus group and interview and that this data will be securely stored.
- I give permission for the researcher and supervisor to have access to my responses.
- I understand that all my responses will be anonymised and any information which might potentially identify me will not be used in published material.
- I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date: / /

Name of Researcher:

Signature of Researcher:

Date: / /

