Working the Borderlands: working-class students constructing hybrid identities and asserting their place in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Through the case-study experiences of 24 White and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) working-class students from three very different universities, we aim to illuminate the often hidden struggle for recognition and respect for classed, 'raced' and gendered ways of being in the university. We discuss how the students perceive their identities in relation to their universities and their peers, and whether they feel the need to adapt and change their classed/'racialised' identities in order to survive and progress or whether they resist any pressures and expectations to do so. We explore the tension between 'assimilation and belonging' and 'betrayal and exclusion' for White and BAME working-class students and consider the intersectional implications. We draw on the concept of hybridity to show the fluidity and fusions of transitioning and developing identities. The article also seeks to contribute further to the illumination of habitus as generative, through a process of hybridity.

Introduction

Drawing on the experiences of 24 White, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) working-class students in three very different English universities, an analysis is presented of how, through processes of navigation and identity work, the students asserted their place in higher education. We explore whether the students felt the need to adapt and change their identities in order to survive and progress at university or whether they resisted any pressures and expectations to do so. As we show, the students acknowledged a range of changes they saw in themselves and others saw in them, and we recount their reflexivity.

We utilise the concept of hybridity (Bhabha 1994; elaborated in the following) to show the fluidity and fusions of transitioning and developing identities. We explore the tension between 'assimilation and belonging' and 'betrayal and exclusion' for the students and demonstrate their strategies of negotiation through the development of hybrid identities and the generation of their habitus (Bourdieu 1984). Through our analysis we show that the students in our study do not accept their marginality or subaltern positioning, but rather they work the marginal space and trouble the borders. The significance and contribution of this article challenges the construction of working-class students as passive victims and aims to illuminate the often hidden struggle for recognition and respect for classed, 'raced' and gen-

dered ways of being. The article also seeks to contribute further to the illumination of habitus as generative, through a process of hybridity.

We revisit the case-study aspect of our project carried out during 2006–2008 (Crozier 2008) considering the intersection of class, 'race'/ethnicity and gender ([AQ3]Crenshaw 1991). Since 2008, the higher education context in the United Kingdom has changed in a number of ways, including the rise in tuition fees, the scrapping of maintenance grants for low-income families and increased competition between universities with the Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework[1] (Boliver 2018). This in turn has led to a more embedded, heightened and thus competitive, marketised university system (James 2018). Institutional and individual racism and White privilege prevail in higher education as well as wider society (for example, Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhopal 2010, 2018; Warikoo 2016). In addition, mental health issues amongst students have increased dramatically over the past five years (Denovan and Macaskill 2017). Partly as a result of these developments, the importance of the student experience, once at university, has begun to be recognised by policy-makers (Thomas 2017). However, research more recent than our own continues to show the implications and consequences of universities not having attended to this or not having effectively addressed classed, 'raced' or gender diversity (Bathmaker et al. 2016; Burke, Crozier, and Misiaszek 2017; Coulson et al. 2018). Therefore, developing insights and understanding of the student experience and struggles of White and BAME working-class students remains highly relevant.

Identifying the borders

Irrespective of type (pre/post 1992 or elite[2]), universities are not traditionally places frequented by working-class people. As Bourdieu, Passeron, and de Saint Martin (1994) noted (albeit writing about France), universities were set up as middle-class institutions displaying, imposing and reproducing White middle-class values. Even though our research took place during 2006–2008, this remains the case today – although the statistics have improved slightly through the continuation and refinement of the Widening Participation[3] policy and implementation strategies (HEFCE 2014; Universities UK 2017). In spite of this policy, social class and BAME representation in all types of university are keenly demarcated, with few White working-class and BAME students attending elite universities (for example, Boliver 2013; see also Posselt [2018][AQ8] in the United States). Working-class students, keenly aware of this, often choose either not to go to university at all or else seek out a university where they believe or perceive the institution holds values and a 'culture' more in keeping with their own (Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2010; Stich 2012).

The theme of 'belonging and fitting in' (Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003; Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003) continues to prevail in Widening Participation discourses and is often regarded as a barrier to university access or access to learning (Burke, Crozier, and Misiaszek 2017). Yuval-Davis (2006) defines 'belonging' in two ways: firstly in terms of an emotional attachment, feeling at 'home', feeling safe and an act of self-identification or the identification by others. Secondly, she argues that belonging can become 'politicised', when it is threatened in some way. It is therefore important, she says, to differentiate between 'belonging' and 'the politics of belonging' since the politics of belonging comprise specific projects designed to construct belonging in particular ways. The universities' strategies around 'the student experience' and in response to the marketisation of education, such as skills remediation and learning support units (Burke, Crozier, and Misiaszek 2017), are, arguably, part of that process of the 'politics of belonging'. However, these do not always meet or address the needs of White and BAME working-class students but rather aim to assimilate students into the hegemonic order.

Within the environment of Widening Participation policy, White and BAME working-class students are 'given permission' to apply for a university place but are given few resources or little support to enable them to make an informed choice (Reay 2003). On accessing higher education, the educational system rarely gives working-class students 'practical and informal mastery of language and culture that can be acquired only in the dominant-class family' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 128), which is seemingly a pre-requisite to success in their passage through the university. Coulson et al. (2018), in their UK study, found that working-class students felt like outsiders in their universities. They recount working-class students' experiences of being ignored and shunned both socially and in the learning context, experiences echoed by Bradley (2017) and Freie (2017) in the United States. Discrimination against and ostracisation of BAME students is also not a new phenomenon (Bhopal 2010; Crozier, Burke, and Archer 2016). Hence, if these students are successful in gaining a university place, including at an elite university, then the question

is: how do they manage this experience? Faced with these prospects, Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine's (2003) and Lehman's (2009) findings, for example, are unsurprising. They argue from their respective studies, in Britain and Canada, that working-class higher education students, in trying to 'belong' and 'fit in', suffer a sense of 'class betrayal' in Lehman's terms (2009, 632) and disidentification according to Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine (2003, 295). Lehman cites Baxter and Britton's (2001) description of 'habitus dislocation' to underline the issue of 'old and new habitus' and the hierarchical order of these. As Lehman's students progress through their degree programme, they express strong ambitions to become middle class. The temporal dimension is important, as no doubt too is the national, 'cultural' context.

In spite of better access to university through Widening Participation policies, some studies, including Bathmaker et al. (2016) and Stich (2012), have argued that higher education continues to play a significant role in the re/production of social inequalities in terms of pedagogy, knowledge and future opportunities. We broadly agree with these perspectives; however, in addition we aim to show how some White and BAME working-class students endeavoured to fight against the impact of this potential oppression, whilst developing but maintaining their classed and raced identities.

Conceptual tools: hybridity, habitus and agency

In order to develop our analysis, we utilise the concept of hybridity in relation to the development of identity and the generation of habitus and to illuminate a fluidity and coalescence of experiences in the formation of new or adapted dispositions. We recognise that hybridity is a contested concept and that some interpretations of the concept lend themselves to relativism or essentialism. Mahalingam and Leu (2005, 841), however, argue that the hybridity perspective contests any notion of 'pure' identities and propose its use as a means of challenging 'dominant modes of social differences'. The category, they say, is not the key focus, but rather the overlap between categories. We use the term in the sense that identity formations are processes of change, development and renewal. Hybridity in our analysis is part of a process of intersections and the cross-cutting of boundaries (Hall and Held 1992) which are also contextualised. It is a fusion of experiences, values and 'cultures' (in the broadest sense); we conclude that these can be creative experiences but are often achieved through struggle. We agree with Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine (2003) that there are no easy hybrids and we recognise the potential pain in identity shifts and fear of identity loss. Through our analysis we argue that hybridity can provide some agency for change.

Bhabha (1994) and bell hooks (2015), in writing about 'race' and post-colonialism, discuss processes of hybridity in relation to the margins occupied by 'the subaltern', as well as the radical possibilities of the occupation of these marginal spaces. In different ways, they state that the liminal space created by hybrid processes provides a vantage point for engagement. For hooks, these are 'spaces of radical openness' which provide the potential opportunity to hold on to '… home life … whilst simultaneously seeking new knowledge and experience' (2015, 206). Bhabha explores the complexity of cultural difference and challenges the binary perceptions of cultural representation. He problematises the evocation of the historical authority of the present 'signifier' and thus disturbs acceptance of 'tradition' or, put another way, dominant values, perspectives and/or ideologies. The in-between spaces can thus provide an opportunity to perceive how power dynamics and processes operate and to assess how to trouble and engage with these. Liminality, of course, remains marginal but, we argue, it provides a space in which to build up resources in order to deal with repressive cultures and practices.

In her work on working-class boys in a grammar school, Ingram (2011, 5 09) identified three types of habitus – 'habitus tug', 'destabilised habitus' and disjunctive habitus' – which she uses to explore 'the processes involved in negotiating the structuring forces of multiple (and sometimes conflicting) fields'. She argues that where the individual operates in different fields other than their 'field of origin', then the experiences can be conflicting and lead to emotional difficulties which in turn can make it difficult for them to operate in the two fields of school and their 'field of origin'. Whilst the students in our study may experience some 'destabilised habitus', in Ingram's terms, within the university 'field' – the context of the competition for scarce resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992)[AQ10] – it is not necessarily entirely off-putting or restricting. In spite of the challenges of the 'field' or fields, our students' university social and learning experiences involve the development of their habitus, rather than the fracturing of habitus. Through our analysis, we aim to provide a sense, through the students' accounts of their experiences, of the lived reality of Bourdieu's (1986) ula: habitus (capital) + field = practice. In order to explore this, we recognise the relationship between habitus and identity. In this view, identity is an expression of habitus or the relationship between the 'inner' and 'outer', between the subjective and the objective (Maton 2010). Identity is, in a sense, the manifesta-

tion of habitus; and where a person operates in different fields, identities are accordingly expressed differently, together with the adaptation (or not) of the habitus.

According to the historical process of habitus, there must have already been something in these students' habitus which has enabled them to transcend fields – from the non-university to the university context. As Lehman (2009) observed, the students in his study must already have had experiences in their secondary schooling to prepare them for entry to university. We surmise this is also likely with our case-study students too. Whilst our-case study students are all working class according to our criteria (see later), they have different previous experiences and they also enter university with, for example, different examination grades. Moreover, once at university, their different universities provide them with varying additional support and resources.

Research methods and data sources

Our article is based on a larger project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.[4] This study is mainly qualitative but we also utilised a quantitative questionnaire with a social class cross-section of students in order to gain an overview of a range of issues pertinent to the student experience, but primarily as a means of accessing students for follow-up interviews.[AQ11] The focus was on undergraduate students in Years 1 and 2, age 18 years and above, who were undertaking certain subjects (Engineering, Chemistry, History, Law, Business Studies, English, Economics) and the study took place in four very different higher education institutions: Northern University, a post-1992 university; Midland University, a pre-1992, civic, university; Southern University, an elite university; and Eastern College, a college of further education where students were undertaking foundation degrees. Following the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with 48 middle-class and 41 working-class White and BAME students, and 27 White and BAME working-class students were then identified for follow-up case studies.

Students' social class was determined by their information regarding their parents'/guardians' occupations and where they were mature students; we also took account of their previous occupation and routes into university. We used the occupation data in relation to the National Office of Statistics (UK) Social and Economic Classifications L7–L14 (Rose and O'Reilly 1998), together with information on parents'/guardians' education profiles; whether the students were first in their family to attend university and whether they received a bursary. We collected some of this information via the questionnaire but further refined the data on social class backgrounds during the interview process. We are mindful of the heterogeneity of the White and BAME working-class students and recognise the use of the categories 'working-class' and 'BAME' can suggest otherwise. Following Mahalingam and Leu (2005), utilising the concept of hybridity will enable us to explore such heterogeneity and the differences of the White and BAME working-class students' experiences and identities.

In this article, we focus specifically on 24 of the self-selected case-study students from Northern University (eight students), Midland University (seven students) and Southern University (nine students). Four of the students at Northern University and one from Southern University are mature students (over 26 years), and at Midland University three are from minority ethnic groups (two men and one woman); the rest of the students are White. Overall, nine students are men and 15 are women. With their agreement, we followed the case-study students across two academic years – Years 1 and 2, and Years 2 and 3.[AQ12] Using semi-structured interviews, we interviewed the students at key decision-making moments (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000) such as the beginning and end of term or at the start of a new module; before and after assessment periods, we kept in contact with them through email and informal meetings and recorded notes in field journals. We spent some time with the students in their environments and aimed to map their cultural and learning experiences, both direct and indirect, and, within the time scale of 12–18 months, charted their academic trajectories. We aimed to gain insights into the social and psychodynamics of student relationships with their institutions and their views and feelings about their university experiences, friendships, learning experiences and motivations. We were interested to discern students' perceptions of themselves and whether these changed over time. All formal interviews were tape recorded and transcribed professionally and checked by the research team. The qualitative data were coded according to an adapted grounded theory approach comprising open coding and axial coding and arriving at key themes through theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These included class identity, pride and resistance, hybridity and managing difference and hybridity as a form of agency, which are discussed in the following and broadly structure the rest of the article. The quotations that we use are based on the thematic analysis of the case-study students and are representative of the theme and the students' perspectives

under discussion (see Crozier [2008] and Crozier, Reay, and Clayton [2010] for further details of the methodology and research participants).

From pride to prejudice

Given the pathologisation of working-class students (Skeggs 1997), we were initially concerned that the students may not identify as working class. However, our case-study students identified as working class or as a having a working-class background and overall most displayed a strong sense of class consciousness. Linked to this was pride in their own achievement, especially given the struggle against the barriers to opportunities, the personal tensions and the financial hurdles they had had to overcome to get to university (Crozier et al. 2008).

Whilst there are broadly similar patterns of behaviour across the three universities, the different social cultural and learning conditions they provide gave rise to different student responses and types of engagement and identity performance. Students blend in or stand out socially or academically to different degrees depending on the context and what they bring to that. We have written elsewhere about the working-class students at Northern University blending in socially but less so academically; whereas at Southern University, students blended in well academically but found the social context more challenging and exclusionary (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). Amy, at Southern University, an elite university comprising some of the most privileged students in the country, talked of the shock she felt by the difference between her and her peers, indicating the challenge she faced in trying to identify with them and the university:

… you do expect it, but quite often even if you expect something it still actually comes as a shock when it comes. I mean, some of them are lovely, but they conform to such a … stereotype, in that they're, erm, rich! Like, they go out with Daddy's credit card, and they go to all the nice places, … I just think it makes you feel like … I thought I was normal until I came here and then the norms have changed like … even things like which sports they do; they all go horse riding and [play] lacrosse and … they come here and they are like [asking] 'Who's Who clubs'! … there is such a majority of people that are different from what I have been used to and … because they are in the majority, they seem to be the new norm, and I'm a bit like, well, I don't fit in here anymore [laughs]. … It's all like, it depends which school you went to, and who you knew there, and who their parents were, 'cause all their parents came to [Southern], and it's all like a network of connections, those upper-class type connections.

Most of the case-study students did not appear to be striving to change the presentation of their selves; indeed, initially, some asserted that they had not changed at all. But as Amy indicates and it became clear from others too, their identities were challenged by others or by their own perceptions of how others see them in a negative and conflictual way. Du Bois (1903), writing about 'race' in the racially segregated United States, described aspects of Black Americans' experience of racism as 'double consciousness'. He described the experience as only allowing Black people to see themselves through the eyes of the 'other world', a sense of 'looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (1903, 5). Some of the case-study students were class self-conscious, frequently watching themselves as a mirror of how they thought others saw them. Kylie Sparke (Northern University), for example, had applied for a prestigious Economic and Social Research Council scholarship to do a masters' degree in history (once she had graduated) at Cathedral University (a local elite university). Although she had been encouraged to apply, once she was invited for interview she expressed anxiety about being judged negatively because of her local accent:

… my lecturer knows him [the admissions tutor] and she says he's really nice and he sounded nice on the phone, but I'm just obsessed with the fact that like he's going to look down on uz and like I'll be scared to talk, I'll be scared to say anything. … Because … I know that I sound quite thick to someone like that. If I was him, I would definitely think I was thick … from my accent.

When she arrived at Cathedral University she was overwhelmed by the tutor, the environment and its aura:

… I was expecting … them to be posh, but I didn't expect him to be as posh as he was. … And his office was like dead posh and everything.

…

… I couldn't really concentrate … I did feel like he was better than uz when I went in. … he's from a whole different class and I just felt like as soon as I said anything he was going to be thinking 'god she's as rough as owt',

when he heard the accent … And I was … conscious of every word I was saying, trying to like cover-up my accent but I couldn't [laughs].

Kylie echoes the shock of Amy's response to the starkness of difference. She expresses a strong sense that she does not fit in socially and a fear that this may go against her. She, of course, is still on the outside of this elite establishment whereas Amy had been accepted at hers. Amy's strategy was to stick to a limited number of friends and was also in her second year. Kylie tries to change her accent in order to adapt but she finds she is not able to, lacking the linguistic habitus[5]. She argues that in any case you cannot change your class, as though it is fixed like a genetic imprint. What she experiences, rather, is the way classed relations are based on differential power, are hierarchical and are perpetuated, in part, through prejudiced and stereotypical views. At a summer school she attended at a South of England university where the fellow students mocked her accent, one student from an elite university confidently asserted that Kylie's degree from Northern University would be in no way comparable to hers from the elite university: [AQ13]

I met someone … last year and she went to [elite university], … and she said that a 3rd [class honours] at [elite university] is worth more than a 1st [class] from [Northern University], which like really upset uz, cos I thought … how many other people think that?

Others' work also confirms the hierarchy of university establishments and demonstrates that Widening Participation strategies are not as equitable as might be thought (for example, Boliver 2013; Bathmaker et al. 2016; Stich 2012 in the United States). If the dominance of White middle-class values in the university represents the hegemony of the ruling class, then the presence of White and BAME working-class students in the university is a challenge to that hegemony. The experience that Kylie and Amy describe illustrates the demand for class conformity and the struggle over hegemonic social reproduction.

Across the two academic years during which we knew Kylie she indicated a contradiction implicit in her views about her (post-1992) university and herself, as though one is a mirror of the other. Impacted by the 'double consciousness', she colluded with others' disparaging perceptions of her university as inferior and expressed the anxiety that she would be viewed in the same way by having done her degree there, even though she admitted that her university experience had been good, and her lecturers are 'proper historians' and have 'credible' degrees from 'reputable' universities. She said she had been 'inspired' by them, and also that she too was 'good' academically. Her experience at Northern University, which enabled her to succeed and to be positioned to achieve her ambition to become an academic, paradoxically appears to haunt her. Kylie's experience of higher education represents, as Brine and Waller (2004) argue, not just the shedding of old identities and adopting new ones, but rather, as they describe, a period of risk, identity confusion and reflexivity. Other students displayed these internal struggles too, although Kylie's identity struggle was the most clearly articulated expression of what Ingram (2011) might term 'habitus tug'.

In spite of such pressures and attitudes, many of the case-study students were keen to hold on to their working-class identity: perhaps holding on to what is familiar, what they can trust and what gives them that sense of belonging, even if it jarred with 'fitting-in'. Maintaining family ties and identities were therefore seen as important. Some students indicated that their parents were anxious that their children may reject them. Bradley Alsop (Midland University) talked about his parents' fear that he would change and become a 'snob' but he declared his class and family loyalty:

I think when I first came to university my parents were worried that I'd end up being really snobby and I'd be ashamed of them. And they said to me like 'don't like forget' but I said, 'don't be stupid'. … I don't really care about what people do; it's just usually people that usually have better jobs that are the people that are arseholes, so it's like I wouldn't ever … fall out with anyone just because I had a better job, or I went to university. It wouldn't really make sense to do that.

Jude (Southern University) suggested a similar sense of concern with the example of his mother identifying his adoption of different turns of phrase such as 'Oh god yes' as an indication of her 'losing' him.

Change and development can take multiple forms and impact in varying ways on identity but do not necessarily involve rejecting 'the original self'. As we have said, the case-study students in the three universities occupy differential (sub-)fields and are thus faced by different and differentially challenging values, cultures and expectations; who the students are, their habitus and their sense of self also combine with this in the process of identity formation. Brad-

ley presents a further but contrasting example of this process in relation to criticism from his university peers to change his accent and dialect – his class signifiers:

I say, 'I ain't done nothing' and people say 'that's a double negative', but … I don't understand what they're on about. … Some people [at Midland University] don't really like it [his dialect] … It's quite strange because in the [residential] halls …, in the first year, I got warned because of the way I spoke to someone and they said I was threatening them. Which it was but it was because they were threatening me, so I said, 'I don't know how it is where they come from but where I come from, they were threatening me so what do they expect?'

Bhavesh (Midland University) who is of British Indian/Gujarati heritage, also recounts the sense that fellow students found him threatening. He muses on whether it is class or ethnically based:

I think I do stay the same … I think people kind of like notice that I'm not middle-class or whatever. I think people at uni can notice … just by the way I talk maybe or like sometimes I'm proper like ghettoed out, like sometimes when I wear my clothes [hip hop gear] [laughs].

… sometimes I feel like people are intimidated as well. …

I don't know what it is … but it seems that people like when I walk past … they like get all quiet. People are talking and then you just walk past and … they like stop talking and just look and then they carry on talking again.

In addition to their class and 'race'/ethnicity, both Bradley and Bhavesh demonstrate the struggle they need to engage in in order to repel the pervasive stereotypical assumptions of the iconic problematic working-class male (Quinn et al. 2006). In these examples the students identify their own differences and that they feel different, often expressing difference in terms of not fitting in. However, they also assert a sense that they are not prepared to accept that this difference is inadequate or inferior (Kylie also makes a distinction between her learner identity and social identity). But it is clear that their classed, racialised and gendered identities become the terrain over which they struggle in the sense of owning their (marginalised) identities or distancing themselves from them, or as we see in the following, managing their 'difference' in a range of assertive ways. Through these examples we see that none of this is a linear movement but rather the students move in and out of the process. Du Bois (1903, 5) described this as a process of merging the 'double self' but without losing their 'older selves'.

Processual hybridity: managing (their) difference

Bhavesh, whilst espousing his own working-class identity on the one hand, seeks to differentiate from the 'typical working class' (stereotype) and challenges the dominant homogenising and White perception of class by evoking his own ethnic difference as part of this:

… I don't see this kind of like class thing. I don't see it as an issue as much as … I think White people have this whole class thing … that's what I've noticed. Because with Indians it's not so much a problem. … I wouldn't define myself in class-terms but I am working-class you could say because, like, my parents have like the bog standard working-class jobs and stuff …. Yeah you could say I'm working-class in that sense but … in terms of like socially I wouldn't say that I'm typically working-class. I'd like to think of myself as a bit cultured … I do go sometimes, to the theatre and whatnot and I do read quite a bit. And like in that, if you'd say that is not like working-class, then socially I'm not.

For Bhavesh his class is more explicitly or perhaps just more consciously (than his White counterparts) mediated by his ethnicity; he claims class is different for 'Indians', for whom pride (and possibly identity) is bound up in achievements with work and financially and 'how well you're doing'. In his explanation of 'I wouldn't define myself in class terms …', he demonstrates his negotiation of dominant cultural norms and resistance through the selective appropriation (Mayo 1999) of what he wants and needs to satisfy his own identity formations. Nevertheless, he still finds that although he can stand outside of 'this class thing', he has to capitulate to the White middle-class norm (again with respect to his speech) and explains the need to adopt a more 'middle-class' accent in his seminar discussion, in order 'to get his point across'. He argues, however, that this is not about trying to fit in but rather to ensure he will be heard and not dismissed. He aims to challenge the alterity and marginalisation of his dialectical location. Bhavesh thus demonstrates a sense of agency and provides an example of resisting the pressure to change and capitulate to hegemonic norms, whilst at the same time negotiating an appropriation of the dominant language style in order to acquire some control over the situation.

Although he is quick to defend his peers and asserts that he has not been 'mocked', Jude (Southern University, but from the North of England) explains a similar issue about the way he speaks:

I would say that my accent has been toned down a lot just being in this environment. Like I do find when I'm in a supervision, for example, I tend to not quite consciously but noticeably I'm more formal in my speech and a bit more, … RP [Received Pronunciation].[6]

The difference indicated by Jude is that he seems to be more disposed to engaging with this process of change. After one year he already reflects that 'I'd like to think I'm a more aware person now and more polished …'. He explains his changed self – his 'polishedness' in his ability to debate (in keeping with the university's tradition) and his use of language precisely. Thus, performing his new/emerging identity, Jude embraces his change, adopting a more assimilationist position, as that is his raison d'être for being at an elite university:

I don't think anyone leaves unchanged and, in a way, I'd hate to say that I would leave unchanged because you know, I've spent a lot of money on myself and I've had a lot of money spent on me here, and I have benefited from it.

At Northern University, the students in our study have not felt under the same kind of pressure to change their overt classed language markers as others elsewhere. Arguably this is so because the dominant linguistic code is the local dialect and accent. This is frequently used by tutors and other professionals from the local area, which suggests it has become less of a class marker and more a regional one: a contemporary take on counter-hegemony in action. The regional identification is apparently very strong and to identify with it is to belong, and thus an advantage rather than a disadvantage (Savage, Bignall, and Longhurst 2005), at least in the local context and in the context of Northern University. The contrast to this is when Kylie applies to the selective, elite Cathedral University, also geographically local, but appears in her eyes to represent a superior environment and espouses a superior 'culture'.

Class differentiation and the psychic response to this exist at Northern University but are much less overt than at Southern University, for example. Fitting into a university which is dissonant from their family and social habitus is different from fitting into a university with which their cultural and social preparation is more congruent. The working-class students at Southern and Midland Universities are faced more explicitly with such dissonance. Such environments and their ethos lead to or reinforce misrecognition in both the Bourdieusian (1984) sense of accepting and absorbing the expectation of the denigrated working-class self and in the Fraserian (1997) sense of only seeing/hearing this accent; for example, as representing someone who is 'thick', as Kylie termed it. The relatively more socially congruent experience for Northern University students raises the question of whether they are falsely 'lulled' into a sense of symmetry, a comfort zone where they feel they are accepted and do not have to change or adapt in order to learn or survive the social scene of the university. Kylie's experience of being ridiculed demonstrates how once these students move out of the 'comfort zone', they are exposed to feeling that 'sense of one's place' and 'a sense of the place of others' (Bourdieu 1990, 113). This is an important reminder that the student experience is situated and thus relative. However, as we have shown, there are threads of shared experiences between the working-class students across the different universities.

The White and BAME working-class students manage their shifting selves and the engagement with difference in varying ways. In addition to the use of 'code switching' there are other possibly more challenging or complex strategies required. Arthur (Northern University), for example, talked about having cut himself off from his 'home-based' milieu but when his degree is finished will return to 'normality', implying a strategy of compartmentalisation (Baxter and Britton 2001). However, later in the same interview he realised this is unlikely to happen. He complained that he now has no one to talk to about his newfound knowledge, his ideas and his newly developed interests. For him that transitional space at this historical moment appears to be isolating but it is not static. Jude embraces his change but most dip in and out and occupy the twilight or liminal space of identity (Grossberg 1996). These students take on the insider/outsider role, a Janus position of looking both ways.[AQ14] They are hybrids but this hybridisation is not a bringing together of equal parts. It is a power struggle over the unequal differences. Sometimes the student cannot adapt – as with Kylie when she found she was not very good at changing her speech, or Bradley who felt angry when his dialect was criticised.

Others articulate their negotiation of the borders as a process where they experience their lives or identities 'coming together'. As Lisa (Northern University) said: '… yeah I think I've changed, I think I have become who I want. I'm doing what I want to do … for the first time in … years'. Yasmin (Midland University), who defined herself as

British Asian, says something similar about the university experience helping her find herself – 'be herself'. Asked whether she thought she had changed as a result of being at university, she responded:

Yeah probably; I think it's for the better as well. … I'm happier in that sense, definitely much happier and I'm so much more confident as well. It's like before I felt when I was in [North West town] that I'd lead myself into some kind of trap that I couldn't really sort myself out, I couldn't really change myself, but it's not like I reinvented myself when I came here; it was more like now I can really be myself.

Yasmin's identity struggles were more prominent in her home town where she experienced racism at college and school, which she said she had not experienced at Midland University and Midland City. She suggests she has the space to explore who she is and how she wants to express herself. At university she has a white middle-class British boyfriend, arguably symbolising a fusion of her identities.

Arthur expressed the impact of his hybrid university experience in terms of the opportunities it offers but also that it creates its own momentum (not least in the context of broader processes of post-industrial change), leading to personal change whether he wants this or not.

… it just showed me that people like myself are capable of going to university and capable of getting a degree and moving forward you know, and not just being trapped in that little work system that everyone on housing estates have got, where like you work at the pit, you work in one of the big industries or you work as a contractor in the shipyard you know and like I say, all that has gone now so I've got to change, whether I like it or not, I've got to.

Arthur, Lisa, Yasmin and others, too, engage with this university opportunity to find their, hitherto subordinated, voice in the way Bhabha describes:

Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community and versions of historic memory that give narrative form to the positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. (1996, 58)

The students thus move in and out of different identity constructions between university and home, local community and peer group milieu marked out by class, ethnicity, masculinities and femininities. Their identities are thus fragmented and often contradictory: a 'lived identity' (Grossberg 1996, 91) formation akin to 'a kind of disassembled and reassembled unity' (Haraway 1991 as quoted in Grossberg 1996, 74 Q15]

Conclusion

Across the three very different universities, the ethos, requirements for 'being a university student', the peer group and the overall expectations were unfamiliar to the working-class students in our case studies and presented them with various challenges, including the questioning and/or criticism of their working-class, ethnic and gender identities. Many of the White and BAME working-class students engaged in an emotional struggle for authenticity which often constituted a personal struggle for recognition. Most of the students resisted the pressure to assimilate wholly to the dominant norm and engaged with the in-between space, sifting and appropriating experiences and insights and ways of being to fuse with their 'habitus of origin', trying to make the 'space' their own. Students' identities are challenged and for some violated and undermined by these experiences. Nevertheless, the students demonstrated resilience and gained strength from their social class identifications and motivations. None of our case-study students dropped out of their course and most achieved very highly, with four of the final-year students going on to postgraduate study (one from Northern University, one from Midland University and two from Southern University).

The working-class students diverge in their sense of themselves and the development of their identities given that they are produced and influenced by their different social, geographical and school experiences. Moreover, the three universities extended varying influences on them, provided different resources to support them and exerted different expectations and pressures on them too. Studies across universities in different nations also point out the influence of national cultural values and opportunities and the different ways social class hierarchies and discrimination play out in relation to social class and education (for example, Lehman 2009; Stich 2012), and we would also include 'race' and ethnicity.

Whilst the students were clearly ambitious and aimed to get 'good' jobs once they graduated, class mobility was not the focus of their ambitions. In Britain there has been much discussion of social mobility in terms of class aspirations, stimulated, for example, by New Labour's desire to transform the working class into middle-class subjects (Ge-

wirtz 2001).[AQ16] Lehman (2009) found that his sample of students were driven by the desire to become middle class through their academic achievement and their appropriation of middle-class 'culture'. Not only was this a motivator, but more importantly it shaped those students' behaviours and experiences. However, the students in our study challenged the middle-class hegemony of the university and demonstrated that academic success does not have to be the privilege of only the middle classes. They challenged the status quo and displayed a determination and resolve to succeed without capitulating to the dominant norm. Such acts impugn the 'aspirational' discourse perpetrated in Britain and the United States.

We have shown that in the face of a range of disruptive but also constructive socio-cultural experiences at their respective universities, the students were confronted with their own difference, through that sense of 'double consciousness' (Du Bois 1903). Through these processes they deconstructed and reconstructed their identities, some distancing themselves from the 'old' version but most seeking to manage multiple versions of themselves, moving in and out but locating themselves at the interface – in that liminal space. Whilst at times this is disrupting and troubling, we argue that it can be, and for many of them was, agentic in the sense Bhabha (1996) and Bakhtin (1981) suggest that hybridity can open up a space in which negotiations can be creative and productive, disrupting and challenging the boundaries (Nederveen 2001) and moving beyond cultural or class (or 'racial') supremacy or sovereignty (Bhabha 1996).

However, the presented analysis also testifies to the additional demands that some students are placed under. Widening Participation policy is not simply about 'fair access' to university but, as importantly, should involve 'fair access' to opportunities once at university; it is in this latter respect that there are significant policy implications for the need for respect, value and recognition. We have demonstrated how the working-class students navigated their way through, at times, inhospitable waters, making or appropriating the space for themselves and hopefully 'others like them'. Overall, the students gained strength and courage in their engagement with the social as well as the academic, and in developing their hybrid identities they made a challenge to the normalised, hegemonic culture in their universities. However, these experiences constitute an unfair requirement on certain groups of students which Widening Participation policy and practice urgently needs to address.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.[AQ4]

1. The Research Excellence Framework is a government device for assessing research quality in the university sector as a basis for the allocation of research funding. The Teaching Excellence Framework is a government device for assessing teaching quality in the university sector and thus a means of ranking universities.

2. Post-1992 university refers to universities and colleges of higher education that were given university status following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. These are also sometimes referred to as 'Modern' or 'New' universities. A pre-1992 university refers to a university established prior to this date.By elite university we mean an ancient and highly selective, or 'Russell Group' university.

3. The term 'widening participation' has been adopted in the United Kingdom by central government since the Dearing Report 1997. It has featured in policy initiatives aimed at addressing under-representation of working-class and BAME groups in higher education.

4. The Economic and Social Research Council is a national funding body for academic research and postgraduate study (www.esrc.gov.ac.uk).

5. By this term we mean that Kylie did not have the disposition or experience of using Standard English and this constrained her ability to hide her own accent and dialect.

6. Received Pronunciation is a term that refers to an accent of Standard English which tends to be associated with the accent of English spoken in Southern England and denoting classed privilege.

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