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Bucking the trend: high-achieving, working-class girls and their strategic university decision making

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ABSTRACT

Based on the life and educational histories of sixteen high-achieving, working-class girls applying to high-tariff universities, this paper rekindles debates about the role of agency within the decision-making process of young people who might not otherwise be expected to apply to such institutions. It draws on Margaret Archer's theorising to tease out the interplay between structure and agency in the form of reflexivity and show how this shapes the girls' educational trajectories, rather than pre-determining them. The paper highlights how social class powerfully influences working-class applicants' university plans, in the form of constraints and enablements, but also argues that the girls in this paper are not simply passive young women to whom things happen. As active agents, they are instead becoming increasingly skilled in reflexively navigating their own pathways through education and advance their applications to high-tariff universities in strategic and deliberative ways.

Introduction

Entry to higher education (HE) among students from all socio-economic backgrounds has expanded significantly over the past thirty years (Bathmaker 2021; Cunningham and Samson 2021; Thompson 2019), and data suggest that more disadvantaged young people than ever are progressing into university-level study by age 19. Yet the gap in progression rates between the most and least advantaged groups rose to its highest recorded level, at 20.2 percentage points, in 2021/22 (DfE 2023). This repeats familiar patterns of inequality visible between students from different socio-economic backgrounds throughout their schooling (Andrews, Robinson, and Hutchinson 2017) and which persist in HE (Crawford et al. 2016) and the labour market thereafter (Britton et al. 2019; Ingram et al. 2023).

Concurrent with the overall growth in participation, there are now 423 registered HE providers in England alone (OfS 2023a). It could be argued that this offers a wide range of opportunities to prospective applicants from all backgrounds. However, it has, in fact, resulted in an increasingly polarised system where informal differences between providers' status and standing are widely recognised, especially by 'those classes already advantaged in economic and educational terms' (Thompson 2019, 11). Consequently, the HE system

continues to involve both 'mass' and 'elite' forms of HE at the same time (Bathmaker et al. 2016), creating a hierarchy that is deeply embedded in wider social structures. So, whilst HE arguably provides a 'place' for everyone, it is not an equal 'place' (Wheelahan and Moodie 2020). It follows then, that working-class applicants are making their HE decisions in 'a very unlevel playing field' (Reay 2006).

Data suggest that state school pupils studying A-levels are less than half as likely as their private school counterparts to progress to 'high-tariff' universities (DfE 2023). These highly selective institutions, with stringent entry requirements, are widely considered to represent the most 'elite' providers and carry significant status in the hierarchically stratified HE system (Bathmaker et al. 2016; Croxford and Raffe 2015; Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2019). However, at the current rate of 'progress', the gap in entry to high-tariff universities between the most and least advantaged 18-year-olds will not be eliminated until the year 2352 (UCAS 2021). As Turhan (2020, 42) sets out, in order to eliminate the gap within the next 20 years, high-tariff universities would need to recruit all applicants from underrepresented areas, regardless of the qualifications or grades they achieve. These patterns of participation are clearly marked by social inequality, which 'ratifies existing class privilege and elite entitlement' (Cunningham and Samson 2021). In other words, within an expanding HE market, opportunities for applicants from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds still fail to equate to their more advantaged peers.

Currently, there is a growing focus on the least advantaged students' relative absence from particular types of HE. This is apparent in the HE regulator's new 'Equality of Opportunity Risk Register' where 'perception of higher education' including the 'reluctance to apply to certain providers' is outlined as one of 12 sector-wide risks that HE providers in England must use to inform their development of widening access targets and interventions (OfS 2023b). However, like Bathmaker et al.'s (2016) description of an 'elephant in the room', and Reay's (2006) seminal metaphor of a 'zombie' stalking the English education system, veiled within this directive is the pervasive reality of social class in young people's lives. Applicants to high-tariff universities like the high-achieving, working-class girls who took part in the research upon which this paper is based might be positioned as successful recipients of 'ambitious' widening access initiatives (OfS 2021). However, their journeys are not simple stories of turning disadvantage into advantage. Rather, as this paper highlights, these young women are actively dealing with the heavily 'implicit' yet 'often invisible' (Bathmaker 2021) role of social class in the everyday practices, processes and interactions that surround their HE decision making.

The paper begins by introducing the material, social and cultural contexts in which working-class young people are making their university decisions. This illustrates how Pierre Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' (Wacquant 1989, 50) have been used extensively in other educational research to explain the classed opportunity structures that affect HE participation. The paper then introduces Margaret Archer's (2012, 2007, 2010a) critique of Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) as an alternative conceptualisation of the interplay between agency and structure. After outlining the methodological design of the research, the paper draws on Archer's theorising to offer an original insight into the ways that a specific group of high-achieving, working-class girls use their 'personal powers' as active human agents (Archer 2007, 2003) to manage the compelling role of social class in their decisions to apply to high-tariff universities. The paper concludes by positioning the girls as strong evaluators and highlighting the implications this has for widening access and

participation initiatives. It draws attention to the value of applying Archer's work as a theoretical lens through which to observe the role of agency in working-class young people's university decision making.

The compelling role of social class

To understand the role of structure in university decision making, educational research often relies on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Key contributions include the way that material constraints may place geographical and financial boundaries around conceivable HE choices for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Donnelly and Evans 2016; Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005) as well as how social class operates symbolically and culturally in young people's decision making through the schools they attend (O'Sullivan, Robson, and Winters 2019; Perez-Adamson and Mercer 2016) and via the influence of their families (Bailey 2021; O'Shea 2015; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Bourdieu's notion of habitus is also widely used to emphasise how psychological constraints operate as social class 'in the head' (Ball et al. 2002, 52) and inform students' subjective perceptions of what is possible and plausible for 'people like us' (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). For children from middle-class families, this means that implicit assumptions about university being their 'ultimate destination' are the norm (Pugsley 1998). In contrast, for working-class young people, the decision to apply is not an 'obvious one', but is arrived at by thinking through reasons and justifying their decisions (Bathmaker et al. 2016, 62). This, it has been argued, is inherently risky as it involves confronting uncertainties about 'who they might become and what they must give up' (Ball et al. 2002, 69).

Habitus has nevertheless been developed and complicated as a conceptual lens to show how students can make the decision to apply to a university outside of the 'norm' of their social class. Ingram (2011), for example, 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 2006) reminding them of their 'normality, frustration and inferiority' (Jin and Ball 2021). Yet Crozier et al.'s (2019) work suggests 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. However, drawing on the critique of Bourdieu's work in the section that follows, the notion of a habitus that 'tugs' (Ingram 2011) or pulls the individual in different directions arguably still limits the amount of agency that working-class young people who apply to high-tariff universities bring to the decision making process.

(Non)-conflationary theorising

One of Margaret Archer's (2007, 2010a) main contentions with Bourdieu's theorising is that change only takes place in so far as it 'makes sense' according to the 'necessities and probabilities' inscribed in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 125), rather than for personal reasons that can be articulated. Unlike in her own work, neither 'social structures' nor 'acting people' can make autonomous contributions to social outcomes (Danermark et al. 2002, 178). Archer (2000, 4) therefore rebukes Bourdieu's work as an example of 'conflationary

theorising' where both elements of social reality are mutually constitutive of one another. Though this 'central conflation' of structure and agency, Archer (2007, 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 (Archer 2007, 44). Therefore, 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' (Archer 2000, 6). 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 (Archer 2007, 47). Consequently, this paper turns to Archer's (2003, 2007) non-conflationary theorising as an alternative framework.

The potentiality of active human agents

According to Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) both structure and agency are distinct strata of reality, with qualitatively different characteristics and powers. They are each considered to be 'irreducible, autonomous and causally efficacious in their own right' (Carter 2013, 46) and, since they are not ontologically entangled, it is possible to explore the interactions and effects 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. By conceptualising this process as 'little interacting cycles' (Ali 2016, 57), it becomes possible to unpack, across the lives of the girls in this research, not only how their social contexts are objectively shaped, but also how they subjectively respond within these contexts and how this shapes and reshapes their educational trajectories.

This paper, in accepting Margaret Archer's invitation to 'explore the interplay between social conditioning and agential responses' (2010b, 12), does not lose sight of the 'differentially advantageous places' from which the working-class young women start their education and the 'different life chances' this entails (2007, 54). It pays close attention to the 'constraints' and 'enablements' that relate to their social class backgrounds and impede and facilitate their pathways to high-tariff universities. However, it recognises that these objective limitations and opportunities are not independent of their subjective reception. As the girls respond to the constraining and enabling effects of their circumstances, and weigh them against their other concerns, they engage in the mediatory process of 'reflexivity'. This is the agential deliberation through which they determine what to do in situations that are not of their own making. It involves much more than the girls simply entertaining an 'objective material or ideational interest' as they embark on courses of action that are leading them towards university study (Archer 2003, 9). Rather, through the interplay of structure and agency in the form of reflexivity, this paper shows how they diagnose their situations, ascertain where their interests lie and plan for their futures. In view of this, while they cannot make what they please of their circumstances, they are positioned in this research as active agents who strategically negotiate the challenges and opportunities surrounding their proposed progression to high-tariff universities.

Life and educational histories

Archer proposes that a qualitative exploration of an individual's 'life and work histories' can provide an understanding of how people engage in reflexive deliberation (2007, 98). Informed by this, the data presented in this paper come from a qualitative exploration of sixteen high-achieving, working-class girls' life and *educational* histories. 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' (Roberts 2002, 3). Each girl used pens and paper to write out or draw a 'map' of the people, events, turning points, experiences and other factors that were personally significant to her educational journey. These creations then supported individual, face-to-face elicitation interviews, which gave external expression to events that had occurred in the girls' lives and how these were subjectively experienced (Mrozowicki and Domecka 2013). All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically using both an inductive approach, to unpack how the girls' social contexts were shaped and their actions and interactions within these contexts, as well as a theory-drive approach using Archer's (2007) work to categorise their reflexive interactions with constraints and enablements.

The research was undertaken between May 2018 and September 2019 when each girl was aged between 16 and 18 and living in the northwest of England.[1] Their recruitment was facilitated *via* a social enterprise where the girls were engaging with a university and careers education programme and their identification as 'high-achieving' young people aligned with its criteria for entry. This meant that 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 in the Russel Group (2016) and Sutton Trust 30 (Montacute and Culliane 2018; Sutton Trust 2011). Those who volunteered to take part in the research each responded independently to an invitation sent to them by email or to a post on the social enterprise's intranet. This led to a sample of girls who recognised themselves as meeting the criteria for inclusion in the research and were the most willing and able to take part at that time. Staff at the social enterprise were able to provide additional information to confirm the girls' background characteristics. This enabled the research to use the proxies of Free School Meals (FSM), being the first generation in their immediate family to attend university as a young participant, and living in an area in the lowest quintile of HE participation according to the POLAR4 classification (HEFCE 2017) as a 'pragmatic solution' (Ilie, Sutherland, and Vignoles 2017) to capturing the materiality of the girls' working-class backgrounds.

While neat objective classifications are too simplistic to convey the subtleties and nuances of what being a high-achieving, working-class girl really means for the young women in this research, they indicate that the girls were bucking known trends in HE participation (Jerrim 2021). The way in which social class operates during their educational decision making and, of particular importance, how they respond to this are made visible through their interactions with constraints and enablements in the sections that follow.

Findings and discussion

Developing self-reliance

To explain how the girls are responding to the constellation of constraints and enablements that they activate during their university decision making, it is important to recognise how

they have developed their capacity to exercise agency in initially unfamiliar educational contexts. As high-achieving, working-class girls, whose parents have little prior engagement with post-compulsory education, they are not replicating the 'familiar contours' of the social settings into which they were born. Rather, they are cultivating a repertoire of new experiences that are 'progressively discontinuous' from those of their families and similarly-situated peers (Archer 2007, 194–195). The girls are learning to draw on their own resources to inform their educational decision making and navigate their pathways through school and towards university, rather than relying on guidance from those around them. As they do so, the girls become increasingly self-sufficient in defining the academic goals they consider worthwhile and more strategic in the practices that help them to navigate the constraints and enablements that they encounter in pursuit of them (Archer 2003).

One of the ways in which 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 (Archer 2007, 195). Compared to the directed or structured guidance offered by middle-class parents (Brown 2013; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009), support from the girls' families was often more implicit. 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'. Despite the support and encouragement of their parents, it was the girls who were positioned as the 'educational expert' in the family (Reay and Ball 1998, 435). 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 secondary school which involved a seven-mile bus ride across the city each day: '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'. While Haley explained that many of her peers from primary school did not understand her decision, this secondary school was available and it was attractive to Haley as a place to succeed in her academic ambitions. The opportunities it offered stood in stark contrast to the local alternative where, she explains, 'people don't really go to university'. With the decision in her own hands, Haley actively resists a complex of constraints that may have prevented other students from applying (Bailey 2021). Even with the travel and being the only pupil from her primary school 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 clearly beginning to make their own ways through their education.

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 available to them. The effort they invest in this is particularly pronounced among the seven young women applying to study 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. It was Amelia's contact with medical professionals as a young carer and personal experience of living with a chronic illness that provided the impetus for her to pursue a career in medicine.

She recognised the need to gain work experience, something her own family was unable to facilitate, and approached her school hoping it could assist her. Yet as Amelia explains:

> 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 thus sought out her own opportunities, joining a youth engagement panel at a local hospital and arranging her own placement through the staff she met there. Like Amelia, to apply for these highly-selective and prestigious courses, the girls are forced to rely largely on their own initiatives to resist potential constraints and go to significant lengths to arrange suitable placements and voluntary work experience. Neala contacted over fifty different places to secure her seven work experience placements with animals; Tegan rang up her local hospital and says she 'bugged them for like a week' until they let her in.

In contrast to Bathmaker et al.'s (2013) description of working-class students who recognise their lack of privilege in comparison to middle-class peers but struggle to mobilise capitals, the girls are taking deliberative action to navigate constraints. As Amelia reflects:

> 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?

By having to make their way independently of others and in unfamiliar settings, the girls are learning to trust their own resources and 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 (Archer 2007, 194).[2] 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 and strategic reflexivity and prompts them to seek out further novel experiences in pursuit of their academic and career goals.

Active knowledge used strategically

As they get older and progress through school, the girls are repeatedly exposed to new situations and 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. Alice, for example, 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 and Sparkes 1997). It was only when Alice started having physiotherapy for an injury at age 16 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.

Following this experience, Alice sought out a volunteering role at a hospital that confirmed her decision to apply to study medicine at university to become a doctor. Although this was not part of Alice's original project, like Archer (2003, 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 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, 253). She uses the acquisition of further knowledge as an enablement to elasticate her future.

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' (Archer 2003, 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. This helps them to plan courses of action on the basis of 'searching for opportunities' at the same time as 'anticipating and circumventing obstacles' (Archer 2007, 215).

Nat was forced to weigh up the costs and benefits of two very different subjects to decide what she would study at university: dance or economics. As she explains in her interview, Nat was incredibly passionate about dance, but also hesitant about this option:

> 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?'

With the breadth of subjects and strong grades that she is predicted at A-level, Nat could be described as having a high degree of freedom to plan her long-term future in either area. However, Nat was torn between pursuing a subject she enjoyed and one she considered to be a more strategic investment for her future. Keeping a 'careful weather eye' on both obstacles and opportunities (Archer 2007, 215), her final decision is strategic rather than concerned with the maximisation of personal preferences. Having already rejected her father's advice to enrol on an apprenticeship, financial considerations and future employability play an important part. She anticipates more enablements in economics compared to dance and is prepared to capitalise on the advantages that it offers for her future.

Prioritising academic acceptance

As others have found, the desire to fit in and belong at university influences the girls' institutional decision making (Archer and Leathwood 2003; Forsyth and 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 et al. 2016). Instead, the girls in this paper 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 (Archer 2007, 222) but does not mean that they avoid high-tariff universities entirely.

In what this paper proposes as an act of 'self-defence' (Archer 2007, 224), Becky's decisions are made to protect her future academic participation and achievement. She decides against applying to a particular elite university after visiting it for a summer school and experiencing a culture where she felt positioned as an 'outsider' in HE (Archer and Hutchings 2000). Describing this in her interview, she explains:

> 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 Oxford 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.

As Becky's account demonstrates, there is a sense of recognition among the girls that not all universities are places where their well-being and happiness can be assured. This reflects what Reay et al. (2001, 863) describe as the 'emotional constraints of choice' that shift according to social class and cause applicants to discount certain universities as they consider the risks of not fitting in. Yet discounting the elite institution is not presented here as a passive response by Becky. She deliberates 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 a place that threatens to encroach on the intrinsic satisfaction she wants to gain from her future studies. To this end, Becky selects five other high-tariff universities as options in her application. Enacting Archer's description of 'strategic' action (2007), she is learning to set her own boundaries and recognises that to go beyond a certain point in her decision making may be damaging to her future goals.

Although the girls are calling into question many of the exclusionary practices of high-tariff universities, they are also alert to the sense of inclusion these providers offer them as successful academic learners. This is an important enabler in their motivation to apply and, in contrast to the 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' (Archer 2003). Yet their focus on applying to study traditional subjects at high-tariff universities simultaneously signals their search for spaces that will enable their academic dispositions to be recognised and to align with those of the students around them. This comes through clearly in Nat's account, as she describes the type of people she is most looking forward to meeting at university:

> 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 […] that are like enthused about it like I am.

Being a girl who is 'nerdy' about economics sets Nat apart from her peers in sixth form. While she has successfully navigated this difference to the point of applying to university, academic acceptance is a factor being accommodated into her university plans. Like the students in Reay et al.'s (2009, 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.

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 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 explained in her interview her enthusiasm for the option 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.

Yet while girls like Haley invest significant amounts of time, thought and effort into making the 'right' academic decision for themselves, this does not mean that they are entirely dismissive of social considerations. Instead, they are using their reflexive agency to deliberate academic opportunities and structural obstacles in conjunction with each other to outline sustainable courses of action for their futures (Archer 2007). So while Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009, 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 where she will fit in *because of it*. In this way, Haley's decision making involves careful consideration of the social make-up of the particular Cambridge college she applies to and where she is subsequently 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 […] it's more like normal I suppose, more like what state school students probably need […] 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.

Like the other girls in this research, 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 conditions that are likely to enable inclusion and success in her future studies. Reflecting Crozier et al.'s (2019, 934) analysis of working-class students attending an elite university, Haley shows a determination to succeed that does not involve 'capitulating to the dominant norm'. 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, Haley is planning strategically for her future.

Conclusions

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 paper are clearly not passive young women to whom things happen. Theorised through the exercise of reflexivity (Archer 2007), their active engagement with constraints and enablements offers an original way of explaining why there is no single, predictable outcome in the HE decisions of working-class girls. This challenges the ways

in which theory operates in much of the existing research literature, which draws heavily on Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) concepts of cultural and social reproduction to understand classed differences in students' educational trajectories and the boundaries that structure conceivable HE choices. Even studies that draw on Bourdieu's ideas to explain how working-class students make decisions to apply to university outside of the 'norm' of their social class (Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2019; Ingram 2011) arguably misrecognise the amount of agency young people bring to the decision-making process when applying to high-tariff universities.

Instead, the current research rekindles the role of agency within the decision-making process of young people who might not otherwise be expected to apply to high-tariff universities. Observed through the interaction of structure and agency, it shows that the working-class girls in this 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' (Archer 2007, 214) and 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 make of the 'differentially advantageous places' from which they have commenced their education (Archer 2007, 54), rather than relying on generalisations about their probable courses of action.

The girls' decisions were not, therefore, contingent on the distribution of constraints and enablements in the situations they found themselves in. Rather, it was the 'strategic' stance that they increasingly adopted towards them that was leading to their proposed engagement with high-tariff universities. For many of the girls this stance was amplified by their academic ambitions, which brought them into contact with opportunities and obstacles for which they had no familiar precedent. 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. They were thus making decisions that might be considered to be 'innovative' or 'risky' in their original social contexts (Archer 2007) 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' the girls built through their successful navigation of situations that were progressively discontinuous from those they had previously known was therefore pivotal in driving forward their university goals. 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 starting to exploit their power as agents to gradually enact change in their lives. The paper therefore 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.

In conclusion, employing Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) work in this paper shows how a specific group of high-achieving, working-class girls have much higher levels of autonomy in their own decision making than they are often given credit for. Their strategic negotiation of constraints and enablements challenges the dominant positioning of working-class young people as service receivers of widening access and participation targets and interventions. Rather, they are presented in this paper as strong evaluators. Skilled in the workings of

structure and agency, they would have much to contribute as active partners in the design and delivery of these initiatives. Their journeys are not simple stories of turning disadvantage into advantage and could encourage a more expansive understanding of the creative and deliberative ways in which some working-class young people advance and protect their university plans. It is in learning to circumvent constraints and capitalise on enablements that the high-achieving, working-class girls in this paper have become increasingly adept in responding to the compelling role of social class in their pathways to high-tariff universities.

Notes

1. Ethical approval was granted by the university where the author completed their doctoral research. Informed consent was obtained from participants and data were anonymised.
2. The girls' confidence in handling new and unfamiliar situations is arguably also reflected by the fact of their voluntary participation in the research itself. It was not undaunting for them to meet with the researcher, who was initially a relative stranger in their lives, and their readiness to engage is notable.

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Disclosure statement

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