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Beyond the promise of social mobility? Re-thinking the purpose of higher education in England through high-achieving, working-class girls' reflexive reasons for applying to high-tariff universities

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ABSTRACT
Higher education is increasingly positioned as a private good for prospective students in England, through which they can hope to gain an economic return on their 'investment'. This paper offers new ways of thinking about the purpose of university study and the benchmarks of graduate success. Using Margaret Archer's understanding of the concept of reflexivity to analyse the decision-making of 16 high-achieving, working-class girls from the northwest of England, the paper highlights the varied concerns driving their applications to high-tariff universities. The girls have ambitious personal plans to materially improve their futures and leave themselves individually better off. Yet their decisions to apply to high-tariff institutions are not solely or primarily motivated by the promise of upward social mobility. Instead, as this paper explains, the girls are nurturing other concerns that inform their decision-making around a broader understanding of university's social goods. The paper argues, therefore, that more could be done to reframe entry into higher education outside of a market-driven and economically orientated approach, as part of a wider project where prospective students can establish their university intentions in line with their underlying values and concerns.

KEYWORDS
Higher education; reflexivity; decision-making; social class; social mobility

Introduction

At the end of the 1990s in England, the shift away from free university tuition transferred the financial cost of participation in higher education (HE) from the state to the individual student. Students were no longer provided with government-subsidised grants and instead entered into an 'obligation to make contributions to the cost of their higher education once [. . .] in work' (Dearing 1997). The new system of tuition fees and loans repositioned HE from being a publicly funded good to an economic

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commodity, where students were committed to financing their education through tax returns on their future earnings (Cunningham and Samson 2021). This move away from the 'public purse' was justified by the expectation that being a graduate would lead to enhanced future employment and earning prospects for students upon finishing their degrees (Bathmaker et al. 2016, 54). For the contemporary HE student who has been encouraged to regard university as an 'investment' in their future, student debt is arguably now configured as a normative part of the university experience. HE applicants are portrayed as searching for value for money in their degrees and are even shown to express positive views about debt as a means of securing high-level careers (Evans and Donnelly 2018; Harrison et al. 2015).

Graduate labour market outcomes have become a key quality metric to hold universities to account on the 'promise' that HE will improve students' employment prospects and earning potential. In the Quacquarelli Symonds University rankings, employment destinations determine how universities are positioned in global league tables (QS 2024). Likewise, the regulator for HE in England, the Office for Students (OfS), uses graduate outcomes as a key assessment tool in its regulatory framework (OfS 2022a) and the consumer-facing quality awards conferred through its Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (OfS 2022b). In the arena of access and participation, universities in England are also required to set targets for graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students (Donelan 2021). The emphasis these assessments place on students' labour market success means that universities are continually competing for better results. Yet what 'counts' as a positive graduate outcome for students entering the labour market is narrowly defined by the OfS as 'highly skilled' or 'professional' employment (OfS 2021). This classification arguably encourages a constricted understanding of success as 'something concrete and measurable' and renders graduate pathways that do not lead to this type of employment 'failures' (Ingram et al. 2023, 5).

There are, however, many different factors that can influence whether a graduate enters a highly skilled role after their degree. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for example, are less likely to attend elite universities than their more advantaged peers (Crawford et al. 2017), which can significantly affect their entry to higher status occupations (Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015) and early career earnings (Belfield et al. 2018). Similarly, Ingram and Allen's (2019) research points to a social class bias in the graduate recruitment process that prioritises knowledge, skills and personal traits more likely to be accumulated by middle-class students. The strong line of accountability on universities to deliver positive graduate outcomes has also led to concern that universities will focus on recruiting students who are more likely to progress to 'highly skilled'

employment by virtue of their privilege (Woodfield 2023). For universities focussed on fulfilling their widening access obligations whilst maintaining a reputation for strong graduate outcomes, high-achieving, working-class applicants who are aspiring to progress to professional careers are 'rare and highly valued' assets (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis 2015, 10).

The high-achieving, working-class girls who took part in the research upon which this paper is based are applying to attend high-tariff universities,[1] often with the intention of progressing into highly skilled and professional employment. However, this paper challenges the assumption that the girls' decisions to apply are based only on the economic return or 'enhanced opportunity for upward social mobility' that these institutions and careers promise them (Cunningham and Samson 2021). Drawing on Margaret Archer's concept of reflexivity to analyse the girls' reasons for applying to high-tariff institutions, the paper considers how young people's hopes and aspirations to attend university can be explained in different ways.

The paper begins by discussing the assumed link between HE and social mobility, and how this connection impacts working-class students. Next, the paper introduces Archer's understanding of the concept of reflexivity and explains the three modes of reflexivity that are adopted as tools within the analysis. The methodological design of the research is then presented, before the paper draws on Archer's modes of reflexivity to consider the variability in the reasons why a specific group of high-achieving, working-class girls are applying to high-tariff universities. The paper concludes by arguing for a more expansive framing of the purpose of university that would allow prospective students to envisage what they may gain from attending outside of current conceptualisations of positive graduate outcomes.

Higher education and social mobility

Social mobility has been endorsed by successive governments as a key policy objective in the agenda to widen access to HE. Focussed on the vertical movement of individuals between different social positions over time (Boliver, Wakeling, and B 2017), becoming upwardly socially mobile through participation in HE is associated with 'advancement' and 'progress' (Reay 2021, 51). These largely positive connotations frame aspirations involving HE and careers that depend on being a graduate as socially and economically desirable. Upward social mobility is assumed to be something that working-class young people should both need and want. When their aspirations can be sufficiently 'raised' to include HE, they are promised that education and later life 'success' will follow (Spohrer 2011). Aspirations not involving HE are considered to be low or simply 'wrong' (Allen 2014). Grounded in the meritocratic belief that with enough talent, hard work

and the right attitude HE is open to all, the 'problem' of non-participation is located with the individual young person who is blamed for their failure to 'ascend the ladder to the "better life"' (Ingram and Gamsu 2022, 202).

Yet the rhetoric of social mobility masks how social class origins still strongly condition HE decision-making. For middle-class families, HE serves as a means to maintain their social position and avoid downward mobility. This is illustrated in the way middle-class parents engage in the practices of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2011) and 'opportunity hoarding' (McKnight 2015) that give their children a competitive advantage in access to university and the labour market (Brown 2013). In contrast, working-class parents who have not attended university themselves may be unfamiliar with the workings of HE or the potential benefits of accessing it (Bailey 2021). This means that the decision to apply is often not an 'obvious one' for working-class young people but is arrived at by thinking through reasons and justifying choices (Bathmaker et al. 2016, 62). Unlike for their middle-class peers, for working-class young people HE is about 'different people in different places' and applying involves confronting uncertainties about 'who they might become and what they must give up' (Ball et al. 2002, 69).

With the 'key' to social mobility relying on the individual rather than the social structure (Ingram and Gamsu 2022), it is the working-class applicant who is required to 'change' if they decide to engage in HE (L. Archer and Leathwood 2003). Positioned as 'other' to the norm of their middle-class counterparts for whom HE is already assumed, they need to demonstrate significant 'independence and resilience' to fit into this arena (Bathmaker et al. 2016, 146). These demands are arguably heightened for working-class young people who apply to high-tariff universities. These highly selective institutions are widely considered to represent the most 'elite' forms of HE and offer an enhanced opportunity for social mobility for the very small proportions of working-class students who access them each year (DfE 2023; Reay 2023). However, applying to such institutions increasingly sets working-class young people apart from family and similarly situated peers and leaves them learning to cope with unfamiliar situations on their own (Davey 2024). Furthermore, once accepted, they then encounter the challenge of navigating a middle-class environment as a working-class student (Bathmaker et al. 2016). To manage these social conditions and hold onto a sense of 'self' that is deeply rooted in their social background, working-class students may occupy 'contradictory in-between class positions' (Bathmaker 2021) or adopt 'hybrid identities' to struggle for recognition and respect (Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2019).

Even when working-class students successfully negotiate the university environment, there is increasing evidence to show that their pathways from degree to employment are no longer linear. Expansion of the HE sector has

led to concerns about an over-supply of graduates compared to the demand from employers (Tholen and Brown 2018). This, it is argued, is incompatible with assumptions of social mobility which rely on there being space in the labour market for those who wish to 'climb the social ladder to careers of higher status than those of their parents' (Ingram and Gamsu 2022, 192). Consequently, graduates from lower social classes may have less stable career trajectories and are less likely to be in graduate level jobs than their more advantaged counterparts (Duta, Wielgoszewska, and Iannelli 2021). Furthermore, although working-class students are increasingly aware of the need to enhance their employability during their student experience, they have access to fewer resources to do so (Bathmaker et al. 2016). Consequently, social mobility through HE is 'not the panacea it is made out to be' for resolving class inequalities (Reay 2017, 127), but may generate 'broken promises and broken dreams' for working-class students as they attempt to enter the labour market (Ingram et al. 2023, 13).

In a context that focuses on enhancing graduate outcomes, but where it is increasingly difficult to achieve them, this paper considers whether the reasons leading a group of high-achieving, working-class girls to apply to high-tariff universities extend beyond the promise of social mobility. In the following section, the paper turns to Margaret Archer's understanding of 'reflexivity' to unpack the girls' decision-making. Archer's work recognises that 'everyone is a reflexive being' and determines their individual trajectory through life on their basis of their reflexive deliberation (M. S. Archer 2003, 167). Importantly, however, not everyone exercises their reflexivity in the same way. The heterogeneity of reflexive deliberation allows this paper to account for variability in the reasons why high-achieving, working-class girls apply to university and make the point that what is satisfying and sustainable for one young person's future might not be so for another's.

The heterogeneity of reflexivity

M. S. Archer (2007, 4) describes reflexivity as 'talking to oneself'. It is a predominantly mental activity that is rooted in the 'internal conversation' which most people engage with silently, regularly and from an early age (M. S. Archer 2003, 2007, 2010). This form of self-dialogue enables individuals to consider themselves in relation to their objective circumstances and to consider their objective circumstances in relation to themselves (2007). Distinct from the process of reflection that is the action of a subject towards an object, reflexivity involves some self-referential 'thought upon the self' (2010, 2). The distinguishing feature of reflexivity is, therefore, that the '"object" under consideration' is being bent back in a 'serious, deliberative sense' upon the '"subject" doing the considering' (2007, 2). This means that a person might move from asking 'what do I do next with this?' to the fully

reflexive 'can I cope with this and do I really want to?' (2010, 2). Reflexivity is not, therefore, a completely individualised or isolated activity and cannot be assumed to be inconsequential (2003). Rather, it involves 'people evaluating their situations in light of their concerns and evaluating their projects in the light of their circumstances' (2007, 34). In this way, reflexivity leads individuals to confront the circumstances in which they find themselves, instead of becoming an integral part of them. Reflexivity can thus be examined as the 'causally powerful relationship between deliberation and action in people's social lives' (37).

Central to Archer's conceptualisation of reflexivity, is the argument that reflexivity is progressively replacing routine action as the primary means by which individuals shape their life trajectories. 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 2010, 136). Since individuals are increasingly having to confront contextual discontinuity between their background and foreground, Archer suggests that there has been an increase in the scope and range of reflexivity which individuals exercise (2007). Crucially, she emphasises that this does not mean that individuals live in an unstructured society or in self-determined circumstances (M. S. Archer 2007). Archer recognises how 'individuals start from differentially advantageous places, with different life chances' (2007, 54). However, to account for variability as well as regularity in the courses of action of those who are similarly objectively situated, Archer describes the process of reflexivity as 'radically heterogeneous' (11). She outlines three different modes of reflexivity 'communicative', 'autonomous' and 'meta-reflexive', which have 'effectively conjoined subjectivity to objectivity in three completely different ways' (M. S. Archer 2003, 341).

Outlining the different modes of reflexivity is important in explaining differences in how individuals make educational and occupational decisions. First, M. S. Archer (2007) describes how those who exercise an autonomous mode of reflexivity are likely to make self-reliant decisions based on their own judgement. While these decisions may be considered 'innovative' or 'risky' among others in their social context (M. S. Archer 2007), when individuals employ this mode they are attempting to 'climb society's "ladders" and to circumvent its "snakes"' (M. S. Archer 2003, 350). Consequently, M. S. Archer (2003, 348) associates autonomous reflexivity with a process of transformation and explains that it 'makes a crucial contribution to the dynamics of social mobility'. Individuals exercising a meta-reflexive mode of reflexivity may also draw on their own autonomous resources as they commit to a course of action. Meta-reflexivity is, however, primarily value-orientated and so embraces ideals as its ultimate concern. In using this mode, people may seek to 'make a difference' to issues

of social justice or fulfil an obligation to act in line with their values (M. S. Archer 2007, 131). Lastly, communicative reflexivity is exercised through a pattern of 'thought and talk' (M. S. Archer 2007, 159) with 'similars and familiars' who share common points of reference (M. S. Archer 2010, 140). Those exercising this mode seek stability in their relationships with those around them, which provides assurance, confirmation or an 'independent angle' on their problems (M. S. Archer 2007, 103). Importantly, establishing or maintaining this stability is not a passive act, but can require just as much effort as the transformation and change involved in autonomous reflexivity.

While Archer's modes of reflexivity are adopted as valuable tools for the analysis that follows, it is important to show caution in the way that these modes are understood. A single mode may 'predominate' when individuals ultimately decide upon important matters, but they are not static properties that can categorise individuals into 'types' (M. S. Archer 2007). Rather, reflexivity may alter during an individual's life course. Depending on the social context, 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 (Porpora and Shumar 2010). This involves people developing a 'repertoire' of reflexive approaches to draw from that 'adapt as circumstances and situations change' (Dyke, Johnston, and Fuller 2012, 836). This paper does not, therefore, consider the reflexivity that young women exercise in their university decision-making to be confined to a single mode. Rather, it recognises that they are capable of adopting different modes and may do so according to their individual concerns and the context they are dealing with.

Research methods

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted with 16 girls aged between 16–18-years-old from May 2018 to September 2019. All the girls were studying at school sixth forms and colleges in the northwest of England and engaging in a university and careers education programme led by a social enterprise. As 'high-achieving' young women, each girl was predicted to achieve at least grades ABB across three Advanced Level (A-Level) qualifications. This reflects the typical entry requirements of the high-tariff universities where they were proposing to continue their studies. All the girls are also described as 'working-class', a term 'beset by problems of definition' (Reay 2023). Three proxies were used as approximates of being working-class: Free School Meals (FSM), being the first generation in their immediate family to attend HE as a young participant, and living in an area in the lowest quintile of HE participation according to the POLAR4 classification (HEFCE 2017). While these proxies simplify the complexities of

being working-class, they were necessary to operationalise class for the purposes of the research. They also indicate how in applying to high-tariff universities, the girls were bucking known trends in HE participation for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jerrim 2021).

To understand how the girls were engaging in reflexive deliberation, the research methods were designed to explore the girls' life and educational histories. This firstly involved each girl drawing or writing a 'life-map' of people, events, experiences and other factors that had been personally significant to her educational journey. Twelve of the girls then annotated a person-shaped, cardboard cut-out with words and images representing how they envisaged their lives in the future and four girls chose to draw their futures within the life-map itself. Producing knowledge about imagined futures that is not vague or abstract can be challenging for young people (Lyon and Carabelli 2016). Therefore, the creation of a 'future person' was intended to facilitate a material and detailed depiction that could be used alongside the life-maps to understand how experiences that start in the present may 'intermingle' with the future (Worth 2011). The girls then took part in individual, face-to-face elicitation interviews where they talked through their life-maps and future-people and responded to questions about their education, HE decision-making and future plans. Informed consent was obtained from the girls at each stage of the research process. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymised, then analysed. The analysis first involved an inductive process, to generate themes from the data without trying to fit them into pre-existing categories. It then involved a theory-driven approach guided by M. S. Archer's (2007) modes of reflexivity and how each girl's 'inner reflexive dialogue' was informing her proposed engagement in HE.

Findings and discussion

The following discussion of the research findings broadly aligns with the three modes of reflexivity that were introduced in the previous section. This discussion begins with the role of autonomous reflexivity in the girls' decision-making and its relation to upward social mobility, before focusing in detail on findings that are illustrative of meta- and communicative reflexivity.

Autonomous reflexivity: 'I want things'

Many of the girls are already able to articulate firm ambitions for future careers in areas such as medicine, veterinary practice and banking. If realised, these ambitions will lead the girls into 'highly skilled' and 'professional' careers that meet the OfS's definition of positive graduate outcomes

(OfS 2021). While such careers are the norm for many young people in middle-class families, realising their ambitions will be a notable achievement for this group of working-class young women. As Alice, who was intending to become a doctor, describes: ‘because I’m the first person in the family who is, like, aspiring to [. . .] go to university and go into a specific job [. . .] it’s like a big thing’. The girls’ plans set them apart from the known experiences of family and similarly situated peers and mean they are managing pathways to university and aspirations for graduate careers that are likely to lead to change and discontinuity in their social contexts. Observed through the lens of autonomous reflexivity, they are ‘getting on’ and fostering plans for upward social mobility (M. S. Archer 2007, 192).

The girls’ decision-making often reflects how disadvantaged young people in particular are encouraged to regard HE as an investment in their futures (Cunningham and Samson 2021). Most of the girls demonstrate, at least to some extent, an autonomous drive to attend high-tariff universities and progress into graduate careers for their own personal advantage (M. S. Archer 2007). They cite travel, money for their future lifestyles and job satisfaction among their motivations for gaining a degree and have ambitious personal agendas to materially improve their futures. Gaby, for example, explains her reasons for applying to study law:

> 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.

Similarly, Freya explains that she is planning to study an economics degree and pursue a career in banking in New York City because, in her words, ‘that’s like the best place to go for banking’. Like Gaby, Freya’s decision is based on achieving a way of life that she has not been able to experience before:

> [. . .] because I’ve come from like not that much money, like it’s kind of been one like, I wanna get there and like, like, have that lifestyle and have the money and stuff like that.

Both Gaby and Freya could be described as ‘active consumers’ within the educational market of HE (Brooks 2013) who pursue pathways through university and into professional careers that are intended to leave them personally better off. As M. S. Archer (2003, 253) describes of individuals who exercise autonomous reflexivity, the girls court ‘contextual discontinuity’ in order to achieve what they, individually, want. This does not mean that young women like Gaby and Freya can make what they please of the circumstances they encounter in pursuit of their academic and career aspirations. However, as high-achieving girls applying to high-tariff

universities, they have a good idea of how to realise what they want (M. S. Archer 2007).

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 at high-tariff universities. To offer a comprehensive account of the girls' motivations, it is important to incorporate into this analysis the other priorities that are informing their proposed applications.

Meta-reflexivity: value-orientated decisions

For some of the girls, their decisions to attend university are not only made for their own personal benefit but are also a means of investing in a cause they felt strongly about. Making decisions using meta-reflexivity, involves being drawn to an 'ideal' and seeking an environment in which it is possible to live this out (M. S. Archer 2003). This ideal began to take form for Amelia from her own experience as a young carer and living with a chronic illness. She is drawn to 'making a difference' in the lives of others and this underpins her ambition to study medicine (M. S. Archer 2007, 264). Amelia is very clear that her aspirations are not framed around the high pay or status of this profession:

> 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 is not autonomously pursuing a degree in medicine in order to 'seek her fortune' within concrete and measurable parameters of success (M. S. Archer 2007, 240; Ingram et al. 2023). Rather, she seeks a vocation where her values of serving others can be fulfilled and this acts as a strong motivating factor in how she is making her university decisions and embarking on plans for her future.

Importantly, however, factors outside of meta-reflexivity's control can readily destroy the alignment of an individual's concerns with their ideal (M. S. Archer 2003). 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 constrain the future options available to her. As Amelia 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

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

2007, 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' and may struggle to live out her ideals whilst dovetailing them with her family obligations (Reay, David, and Ball 2005, 85). With a conceptualisation of university as being about more than upward mobility, Amelia thus acts subversively and constrains her options rather than pursue a more individualistic strategy to access HE.

In pursuing their ideals, M. S. Archer (2003) describes individuals who make decisions using meta-reflexivity as social critics. In choosing where to study, some of the girls are not looking for universities with the best economic returns or highest proportion of students with 'positive' graduate outcomes, rather they are searching for institutions that live up to the values that matter to them. Estella, for example, ruled out the prestigious university where she initially wanted to study 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.

As a young woman who says she has become increasingly interested in issues of diversity through a growing interest in the news, current affairs and politics since starting at sixth form, Estella has 'personal clarity' about her non-academic concerns (M. S. Archer 2007, 221). Exercising meta-reflexivity in deciding where to apply to and where not to apply, Estella is loath to apply to an institution that does not give visibility to Asian students like her. Showing a 'keen awareness of issues around cultural mix' (Reay et al. 2001), Estella concludes that after going through the prospectus, the university she had previously set her sights on 'just like doesn't seem that right for me'. Rather than risk jeopardising her future academic participation and achievement in an institutional culture that does not live up to her ideals, 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 a meta-reflexive understanding of what is fair.

Communicative reflexivity: people-orientated decisions

Although interpersonal relationships are often not the 'foundation blocks' of the girls' decision-making (M. S. Archer 2007, 226), they matter to the

girls and are accommodated into their future plans. For Guilianna, trying to please her parents is a key reason for applying to university to study medicine. This does not mean that she shows a lack of enthusiasm for what she could individually gain from HE. Instead, characteristic of autonomous reflexivity, Guilianna expresses excitement about the extended horizons and opportunity to become more self-reliant that attending university can offer her:

> 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.

Although Guilianna's parents would like her to accept a scholarship and contextual offer with lower entry requirements from a local university, she declines this option because it would mean living at home. Instead, Guilianna looks forward to the independence she will gain from studying in a different area.

Guilianna's autonomous concerns are, however, 'dovetailed' with social concerns more akin to communicative reflexivity where family and friends are an individual's ultimate concern (M. S. Archer 2007). In this way, Guilianna uses her high grades and associated application to study medicine at university to 'please' and 'propitiate' her parents (M. S. Archer 2012, 131):

> 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

Importantly, in contrast to the upwardly mobile and market-driven student, Guilianna's decision to apply to university is not taken entirely autonomously. She is keen to move away from home and gain independence for her own future benefit, but this is counterbalanced with an altruistic desire to give back to her parents. They have always wanted her to become a doctor and are, in Guilianna's words, her 'core motivation'. Making her parents proud provides a significant interpersonal motive for working hard, achieving high grades and going to university.

For other girls, it is through current or envisioned friendships that they are demonstrating communicative reflexivity. Many of the girls have struggled in the earlier stages of secondary school to negotiate conflicting academic and social tensions. However, as they progress through school and begin to select their own subject options to study for their GCSEs and then A-levels, the pupils around them become more academically similar. As Haley and Becky describe:

> I definitely stuck with the people who brought out the best in me. And like my friends got A*s in their A-levels and others got As in their A-levels and they're all going on to do amazing things now so. Yeah, they're really motivating I think. (Haley)

> We're all really proactive in terms of like education in school and that. [. . .] We like give each other like little videos, or [. . .] like articles and stuff like interesting things we've heard in the news and we'll talk about them all together and help each other learn new things. (Becky)

Academic friendship groups provide the girls with spaces where each friend reflects the 'same' and where their educational efforts and ambitions are 'acceptable, legitimate, and normal' (Renold 2001, 583). These friendships thus encourage some of the girls to externalise what might otherwise remain an internally deliberative process as they make important decisions about their next steps. Mollie, for example, describes the role of her friends in managing the pressures and stresses she experiences:

> 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.

For working-class young women whose decisions stand out from those of their family, these trusted networks of academic friends are important. They provide peers who share the girls' interests and concerns and can offer advice that they may not be able to find elsewhere.

Not all the girls, however, have a friendship group they describe as academically 'similars and familiars' in school (M. S. Archer 2010, 140). Several of the girls describe how university is an opportunity for a fresh start in this regard. What Nat, for example, is excited for is: 'meeting people that are the same as me'. As a high-achieving young woman who feels her peers in school do not share her academic interests, the prospect of attending a high-tariff university offers her the chance to meet people who are also enthused by studying economics. Although, as M. S. Archer (2007, 165) warns, 'familiarity and similarity cannot be prefabricated', in choosing this type of highly selective institution for her future studies, Nat is hopeful that she will meet like-minded friends. Certainly, as the working-class students attending an elite university found in Reay, Crozier, and Clayton's (2009, 1115) research, the university may offer Nat the 'comforts of academic acceptance' that she has not been able to find in school.

For Gaby, the motivation to meet new people at university came from feeling in the minority at school among friends who she describes as 'quite rich' and 'spoiled':

> like I love my friends and everything but like I've been with the same people since high school and [. . .] we're all very different and I'd quite like a new group of friends I think. That's like one of the reasons like I regret not going a different college. Coz like my favourite things is like meeting new people. [. . .] So I'm like quite excited just to have like new people around me.

Gaby is keen to expand her social circle and establish a friendship group at university that she will find more 'satisfying' (M. S. Archer 2007). Mirroring characteristics of communicative reflexivity, having common reference points with those around her is important to Gaby but is not something she has found in school. Gaby's hope of finding 'similars' within a high-tariff university might seem surprising given the 'unease' and 'exclusivity' that working-class applicants often anticipate experiencing within these selective HE environments (Reay 2021, 57–58). However, Gaby has already had the opportunity to meet other young people who share her university and career goals and come from backgrounds similar to her own when she attended a university summer school. It is not, therefore, unrealistic for Gaby to base her university decisions around this social motive. University is based on her interpersonal concerns, not only grounded in autonomous reflexivity.

Conclusion

Drawing on the lens of autonomous, meta- and communicative reflexivity, this paper has shown that the reasons why working-class girls apply to high-tariff universities are more diverse than the concrete and measurable indicators associated with 'positive' graduate outcomes suggest. In many ways, the girls 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 (Clark, Mountford-Zimdars, and Francis 2015). Most of the girls have not experienced financial security in the past and have rarely had opportunities to travel. They are excited and optimistic about the experiences they will gain whilst undertaking a degree from a high-tariff university and the life that being a graduate will bring. The girls 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 and Samson 2021). As such, they manifest concerns typical of autonomous reflexivity as they strive to satisfy 'individual preferences' and leave themselves personally 'better off' (M. S. Archer 2007, 264). Presented in this way, the girls' ambitions are illustrative of 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 is not the only reason why the working-class girls in this paper are applying to study at high-tariff universities. Reframing their aspirations using a more dynamic understanding of

reflexivity shows that some of the girls are not only making educational decisions for their own future benefit. The girls are nurturing concerns other than only upward social mobility. These concerns include those that are associated with meta-reflexivity, which are linked to the young people's ideals. University decisions may thus be driven by wanting to 'make a difference' in the lives of others or meeting others' needs over their own (M. S. Archer 2007). They also involve avoiding pathways or places that will not allow for the expression or development of the girls' values. Therefore, in making decisions through the pattern of meta-reflexivity, the girls are not afraid of taking subversive action and forfeit some of the HE options available to them. They are, as Archer describes, 'willing to embrace downward mobility and its objective losses in order to pursue their vocations' (M. S. Archer 2003, 351).

Additionally, through the pattern of communicative reflexivity, this group of working-class girls accommodate interpersonal concerns into their decisions to attend high-tariff universities. This does not mean that they reject the individual benefits of HE entirely, but they dovetail it with efforts to accommodate other people in their plans. For some of the girls, this involves making decisions to attend university that are driven by a desire to make parents proud (M. S. Archer 2012). For others, academic friendships offer the stability needed to feel comfortable and supported in their university plans. The hope of finding other people with whom they share common points of reference is also a driving factor for the girls in their applications to high-tariff universities. Within these providers, they envisage spaces where their academic interests and working-class backgrounds will be accepted.

Both the modes of meta- and communicative reflexivity present an alternative conceptualisation of what university is for and what prospective students envisage they may gain from it. These modes show that social mobility is not an absolute goal for all working-class applicants. Rather, they present different ways of thinking of the purpose of university study and the benchmarks of graduate 'success'. Social ideals and relationships with family and friends are not, however, legitimised reasons for wanting to go to university within the current HE landscape. This risks alienating young people who are uninterested in the economic rewards of a degree or disbelieving of its worth in the current graduate labour market. A more expansive framing of university where prospective students can establish their HE intentions in line with their underlying values and concerns is necessary if universities are to continue to attract a diverse range of applicants. As this paper shows, the purpose of attending a high-tariff university is about more than just social mobility. The role of young people's values and interpersonal concerns in university decision-making should not be downplayed.

Notes

In the UK, high-tariff universities are highly selective HE institutions and demand the highest grades for entry. Due to the difficulty in gaining admission to these institutions, they are generally considered to be the most prestigious and elite universities.

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