Discoursing performativity for 21st century education: an ethnographic study of high-achieving 6th form students completing A-Level study and progressing into higher education in the UK from *Brook College*

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For my Father and Mother. This is all yours.

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Chapter 7: *The A-Level Mindset*

Chapter 8: *Endpoints*

Abstract:

This thesis reports on an ethnographic case study, informed by the critical frames of postmodernism and poststructuralism, and offers a critical evaluation of qualitative-interpretive methodology alongside a discussion of substantive issues. Primarily, I focus on neoliberal performativity in the context of Level 3 students' completion of their A-Level studies as they navigate progression into Higher Education (HE) in the UK from a large sixth form college – *Brook College. Brook College* students and staff, therefore, account for the study's primary participants, though other stakeholders were also involved such as HE representatives. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively and reflexively via extended periods of in-depth participant observations and interviewing, supplemented with documentary evidence and researcher-generated photographs, analysed using an socio-theoretically informed style of critical discourse analysis, understood as both theory *and* method.

The analytic-interpretive chapters focus, in turn, on *UCAS Personal Statements*, and on a new teaching and learning approach called *The A-Level Mindset* implemented in *Brook College* during fieldwork. I explore these analytic 'subjects' as "instrumental" cases (Stake, 2005) to, ultimately, examine the nature and effects of discourses and practices of neoliberal performativity, firstly, on students' experiences of completing their A-Levels as they attempt to progress into HE, their social identities and subjectivities as learners and their thinking about what HE is (and what it might be *for*) today; and, secondly, on the pedagogical practices and professional identities of *Brook* staff, as they guide and support students through this process.

In conclusion, I extend my substantive-interpretive analyses through an interrogation of the hegemonic discourse of skills and associated (re)constructions of 'learning as a form investment' that appear to characterise the dominant pedagogical practices and understandings of education in *Brook College* amounting to a 'preparation' for the forms of education students will experience in HE. In particular, I further develop my interpretive analyses relating to the popular contemporary

educational notion of "resilience" – a central plank of *The A-level Mindset* programme – as a technology of the self indicative of "embedded neoliberalism" (Joseph, 2014), and draw wider connections to the contemporary mental health "crisis" in HE. Secondly, I more deeply explore the methodological problematics I encountered during this study and reflect on the learning, enhanced reflexive understandings and 'new' positions I feel I have arrived at through a discussion of the onto-epistemological fields of posthumanism and 'new' materialism.

Though, this study's central contribution, as I see it, is a critically reflexive parallel evaluation of methodology *alongside* discussions of substantive issues to outline the conjoined forms of learning I feel I have achieved regarding performativity – both in the context of contemporary HE and today's prospective HE students in the UK, *and* in the context of doctoral study and 'becoming (an) academic' in the neoliberal academy as I have experienced it. In doing so, I try to articulate resonances that I believe exist between this study's interpretive assertions, its methodological problematics and my own experiences of doctoral academic labour as manifestations of the same kinds of performative neoliberal discourses and governmentalities.

To close I offer a series of more 'personal' reflections on the performativities, I feel, are central to 'becoming (an) academic'. I try to connect my own reflexive commentaries of conducting this study and my embodied experiences of doctoral study, to extant discussions regarding the changing nature of contemporary doctoral education and the mental health and wellbeing of today's doctoral students within the performative, neoliberal 'culture' of the academy set within the wider knowledge economy.

1.0.   Introduction:

This thesis explores students' experiences completing their A-level studies as they navigate progressions into higher education (*hereafter*, HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) from a large 6th form college in the North West of England. More specifically, I examine the contemporary nature and effects of discourses and practices neoliberal performativity in education in the context of students' thinking about and experiences of progressing onto university through the completion of their A-Level studies. More than this, however, I also attempt to (re)focus these same analyses and interpretations to reflect on the very practices and processes of conducting this qualitative-interpretive research, as a doctoral student, in the performative, neoliberal academy.

This thesis, which seeks to be informed by the critical insights and perspectives of postmodernism and poststructuralism, reports on an ethnographic case study conducted at a 6th form college in the north west of England between 2016/17 and 2018/19. The project focuses on Level 3/A-Level students' experiences of simultaneously completing their programs of study and progressing into HE through UCAS (*Universities and Colleges Admissions Service*). Fundamentally, I seek to examine their social identities as learners in conjunction their views, attitudes and beliefs regarding (higher) education, alongside the institutional pedagogies and practices used to support them in the completion of their A-Levels and prepare them for this next 'stage' of their lives. As such, students and college staff account for this study's primary corpus of participants; however, other 'significant stakeholders' were also involved, such as students' parents and visiting HE representatives.

In the ethnographic 'tradition', I undertook an extended programme of in-depth fieldwork employing largely unstructured, naturalistic methods of participant observation, interviewing and focus groups combined with documentary and field artefact collection utilising a case study 'strategy' (Stake, 2005). Additionally, to enrich the data and attempt to expand traditional/conventional notions and approaches to ethnographic fieldwork and 'data', I also

generated my own field photographs and include my own reflexive commentaries as an added 'layer' of data.

As is common in many qualitative-interpretive, ethnographic methodologies, data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively and reflexively. Correspondingly, the project's methodologic design was considered emergent, shaped through a continuously critical and reflexive engagement with the processes and problematics of inquiry itself, my emerging subjectivity, the data and the study's unfolding interpretations.

Analysis of the data is best described as having proceeded thematically, informed by a socio-theoretical understanding of critical discourse analysis as both theory *and* method drawing on 'Foucauldian' and Faircloughian (Fairclough, 2001a, 2001b) perspectives and approaches. In this respect, I also draw on the insights offered by Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) theorisations of discourse. Operating in this vein, I deploy a number of 'Foucauldian' concepts, analytics and imaginaries such as 'governmentality', 'technologies of governance' and '…of the self', alongside related theoretical ideas elaborated by other scholars, as analytic-interpretive 'thinking tools' throughout. Similarly, I draw on works of postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy and theory in an analogous way to reflect on this study's onto-epistemological and methodological practices, processes and problematics to question, as Usher (1996, pp. 37) advocates, the "identity of the research" and "what is going on in this research?" as I make it happen. Indeed, part of the intended 'subversion' of this thesis is an attempt at blurring the conventional separation of ontological, epistemological and methodological issues from substantive, interpretive issues, and again from reflexive accounts of these, to destabilise the idea that 'data' is always and only *about* empirical issues based on what we collect in the field.

This study's analytic practices, and my own perspectives on the processes of data analysis, also owe a large debt to enhanced understandings gained about 'writing up' during 'writing up' itself. Throughout fieldwork and beyond, I started to expand my ideas about writing as a(nother) 'method'

of analysis following Richardson & St.Pierre's (2005) work; reconceiving analytic practices *and* the 'writing up' of analyses into interpretive accounts as a deliberately messy (Law, 2004), productively indeterminate, undirected and 'nomadic' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2007; Sellers, 2015) practice in order to subvert the dominant discourses and conventionally accepted practices of analysis, academic writing and reporting in the social sciences.

With this critical tone in mind, the following thesis is not structured in a way that is 'typical', as I understand it. For example, I begin immediately with an extended discussion of methodology and there is no 'stand-alone' literature review as is common in doctoral theses. My engagement with extant literature was not confined to a relegated status and practice undertaken prior to fieldwork but was a continuous thread throughout this work. I feel I have critically engaged with and utilised a wide range of academic literature, social theory and philosophy throughout with regards to both methodological processes and problematics, *and* substantive data and interpretations. I felt that to hold literature apart from reflexive methodological accounts and from substantive-interpretive issues, in these ways, would be to collude in "a schooled *insensitivity* in reading" (Standish, 2004, pp. 492; Hodgson & Standish, 2009, pp. 314, *my emphasis*) that I felt would be unbecoming of a 'critical' researcher seeking to be informed by the critical frames of postmodernism and poststructuralism, and their provocations to challenge and work outside accepted systems and traditions.

Thus, methodologic discussions come first and precede the 'findings' of this study, accounting for a large proportion of this thesis' contributions. While this may be 'unconventional' in terms of sequence and weighting, it is not accidental. I want to make evident, in part via the 'structure' and form of the thesis, that I see no real distinction between the practices and processes we use to construct knowledge and the knowledge constructed as a result; the two are deeply connected and contingent. I also wanted to disrupt the idea that 'data' is always and only *about* substantive interpretive issues separable from methodology and vice versa. Thus, my in-depth, reflexive methodological chapters take the processes and problematics of this inquiry as another layer of

'data' regarding the nature of research conduct, alongside the ethics and politics of inquiry in contemporary HE institutions, that appear more keenly organised by and around the practices and imperatives of performativity. In this effort, I try to examine my own experiences of conducting this study and my critical engagement with its/my 'failures', challenges and problematics as additional forms of 'data' to enhance and refine my own understandings, and importantly, learn more about research itself.

To 'conclude', then, I offer a series of reflections on both the substantive, interpretive contributions of this study and their wider implications with regards the study's 'objects' and the contemporary landscape of HE, as well as on this study's methodological practices, processes and problematics highlighting the enhanced understandings and positions regarding onto-epistemology and qualitative-interpretive methodology I feel I have gained. My aim, here, is to exemplify the parallel forms of learning I feel I achieved about neoliberal performativity in the context of students' completion of their A-Level studies as they navigate transitions into HE, while also highlighting the connected forms of personal learning and development I have accomplished as a doctoral researcher in 'becoming (an) academic'. Given the deep imbrication of my position within the academy and the primary 'objects' of this inquiry, I attempt to draw conclusions about how the 'substance', processes and context of this research are, ultimately, examples of the same prevailing discourses. And lastly, in closing, I offer a series of 'personal' reflections on the performativities I feel are involved in doctoral study and 'becoming (an) academic' attempting to connect 'personal' feelings and embodied experiences to extant empirical discussions about doctoral students' mental health and wellbeing.

In the remainder of this introduction, I provide a brief overview of the thesis including short synopses of each chapter.

1.1 Thesis Overview:

– Following this introduction, *Chapters 2, 3* and *4* contain this study's methodological accounts.

– *Chapter 2* is sub-divided into three large sections. The first sub-chapter, *"Preceding echoes"* *(Sellers, 2009)*, begins with the section '*…Opening…*' and offers a critically subversive reading of the overlapping and (dis)continuous fields of postmodernism and poststructuralism to 'define' the situation of this work and myself/my subjectivity by essentially refusing the imperative for definition and the 'closures' that emerge from 'accounting', at the outset, for one's subjectivity and situatedness. After this, I begin to report on my experiences of institutional methodological and ethical planning and approval prior to fieldwork then move on to explore some of the initial challenges I faced navigating recruitment of participating institutions. The second section, *Methodological Transformations,* discusses significant methodological adjustments necessitated by the emerging exigencies of this study's attempted enactment. The final section, '*Getting in*', discusses the challenges involved in gatekeeping and access negotiations with *Brook College* in terms of methodologic design, ethical practice and the politics of inquiry.

– *Chapter 3,* '*Getting going*', reports on my entry into the field and initial phases of data collection. In the first section, here, I examine issues regarding (perceived) researcher roles, identities and associations relative to different participant groups that I felt impacted aspects of data collection in the field. In the second section, I describe *my* rationales for and practices of unstructured participant observation, documentary/field artefact collection, photo generation and, finally, my perspectives and approaches to interviewing.

– *Chapter 4* focuses on the 'methods' of analysis and interpretation used in this study. In *Methods Assemblage,* I offer an account of how *I* began to (re)conceive the idea of 'method/s', their combination and uses, in non-conventional ways. Following this, I discuss the initial processes of critical discursive analysis and my own characteristic analytic-interpretive practices-processes beginning with informal processing of unstructured observational and interview data. I then describe in more detail how I began to formalise the processes of critical discourse analysis, utilising largely unstructured thematic interpretive 'coding' practices using index-cards in a cyclic, reflexive

methodology. And, lastly, I reflexively explore my challenging experiences in writing this thesis'

interpretive accounts to highlight my emerging perspectives, approaches and understandings to

Writing-As-Method.

– *Chapters 5* and *6* are the first of this thesis' analytic-interpretive chapters focusing on *UCAS*

Personal Statements. The over-arching title, *The Paradoxical Statement*, highlights that this analysis

focuses, primarily, on a range of contradictions, incongruities and ambivalences which appear to

structure thought, practice and purpose regarding students writing of a UCAS personal statement.

Specifically, *Chapter 5* discusses a range of discourses, normative practices and expectations

regarding students' choices of undergraduate courses on UCAS forms and the imperative to be

'informed' choosers through in-depth HE research. *Chapter 6,* then, moves on from and extends

Chapter 5 to examine the paramount position of importance the rhetoric, language and discourse of

'skills' occupies in personal statement writing.

– *Chapter 7* analyses a newly implemented pedagogical programme in *Brook College* known as *The*

A-Level Mindset. Upon entry to the field, *Brook College* was already in the process of implementing

this new strategic teaching and learning initiative centred around the *A-Level Mindset* programme

and "VESPA" model (i.e. "Vision", "Effort", "Systems", "Practice" and "Attitude") taken from the

teacher companion book of the same name by Oakes & Griffin (2016). In the first sections, I examine

the technology of "Vision" in the context of, firstly, staff encouraging students to construct

intrinsically motivating life goals tied to their educational progressions and secondly, students' own

reflexive 'self-vision' called forth and demanded by the range of self-reflective activities they are

required to engage in as an assumed condition of their sustained performance and progress. In the

second section, I examine the college's 'new' pedagogical focus on students' "resilience" by

exploring a series of prevailing deficit assumptions regarding students' attitudes and learning

behaviours that provided legitimation for specific pedagogical interventions geared towards

encouraging students to better structure and systematise their learning and achieve greater self-discipline to secure success in A-Level examinations.

– *Chapter 8, Endpoints,* is divided into three sections: firstly, analytic-interpretive reflections, secondly, methodological reflections, and finally, 'personal' reflections. In *Endpoints (1),* I offer elaborated reflections on this study's central analytic-interpretive themes and consider the wider implications of these 'findings' in relation to the changing landscape of contemporary HE principally focusing on the questions: What is HE (for) nowadays? Who are today's would-be HE students? What kinds of learners are they (required to be)? How do they 'make sense' of the processes and purposes of learning, and of themselves as learners? What are their priorities? How are they 'prepared' for HE? And, how might these connect to wider socio-political patterns, issues and forces evident in HE and society today?

– In *Endpoints (2),* I more deeply elaborate the onto-epistemological and methodological problematics this study has brought to the fore by drawing on a range of postmodern andpoststructuralist theory and philosophy – primarily the philosophical imaginaries of Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2007) and the contributions of Patti Lather and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (among others) – to highlight the enhanced understandings I feel I have arrived in this work. In this respect, I try to impress the kinds of transformations that I feel have occurred in my thinking about research as a result of my critical and reflexive engagement with/in this project, its problematics and 'failures' (Lather, 1994). I briefly explore how my thinking on onto-epistemology and methodology have developed and complicated, and how these 'new' positions, perspectives and understandings may link in with posthuman and 'new' materialist ontologies.

– And, finally, in *Endpoints (3)*, I attempt to draw parallels between this study's interpretive assertions and my developed methodological reflections and understandings as essentially speaking to the same kinds of performative, neoliberal discourses and governmentalities. I do this through a series of deeply 'personal' and embodied reflections on myself, my experiences conducting this

study and the associated identity work of 'becoming (an) academic', further connecting these with theorisations to the prevailing performative imperatives, 'pressures' and effects that appear to impact doctoral students, in terms of their mental health and wellbeing, in problematic ways.

2.0.   *"Preceding echoes" (Sellers, 2009)*

In the following sub-chapters, I critically reflect on a number of standard institutional policies, procedures and practices doctoral researchers are typically faced with and must respond to in the early stages of their PhDs. I have come to believe, through my own fieldwork experiences, that many problematic tensions exist between these institutional procedures and the actual practices and processes of conducting ethnographic inquiry in the field.

However, before proceeding, it is 'usual' – that is to say, conventional – for doctoral students to begin their theses in a particular way; most usually with descriptions of the specific ontological, epistemological, methodological and theoretical frames, frameworks and perspectives within and through which they situate themselves and their work. Many might also include an exposition of 'key' theories, ideas, concepts and terms that are thought to discursively constitute these disciplinary approaches and their conventionally associated style/s of thought and practice. The logic here, is that readers are afforded the opportunity to begin to form understandings regarding the 'positioning' of our subjectivities, our methodological practices and the provenance of interpretive assertions that follow on from these. These are accounts that set out to '*account for*' our thinking and our approach/es to our work.

At this point, it seems apposite to draw attention to the language I have employed here – the term 'account/s' can be located both in the discursive registers of PhD/ethnographic writing and of financial management and reporting. And perhaps there is an(other) overlap here, too, inasmuch as the term appears to be 'at home' within the performative, managerialist audit cultures circulating in academia and formal education in the form of discourses regarding *account*-ability.

Such 'accounting for' is also evident in the conventional/normative academic 'ritual' of compartmentalising one's thesis into discretely delimited chapters, artificially separated from one another, proceeding with (apparently) coherent reciprocal and progressive focus from ('accounts' of)

ontology to epistemology and methodology, to ethics, to data collection, to analysis and so forth. Even my self-proclaimed 'non-conventional' structure, here, while subversive, still stands very much in relation to this dominant mode. As Lather & St. Pierre (2013, pp. 630) point out: "…we always bring tradition with us into the new, and it is very difficult to think outside our training, which, in spite of our best efforts, normalizes our thinking and doing." What this dominant mode and structure encourages (perhaps, *demands*) is not just an account of how we have carried out our work, but an account of *ourselves.* Through such discourses and technologies of academic reporting in PhDs, then, *we* are "called to account" (Butler, 2004, pp. 115).

As noted, conventionally at least, often the first, most significant portion of a doctoral thesis – at least, for many qualitative(-interpretive) inquirers – will be discussions of the ontological and epistemological perspectives and commitments guiding themselves and their work, sometimes taken together with discussions of 'theoretical frameworks' and methodological design/s, where the focus is on defining the frames and terms of one's study. Though, as noted earlier, this thesis is not structured (or, performed) in a way I understand as 'typical' or 'conventional' in these respects. For instance, I have included no stand-alone 'literature review' as is common practice; nor are there separate/d accounts devoted to my ontological and epistemological perspectives or prescriptions of 'theoretical frameworks', that come prior to discussions of methodology, data collection and analysis 'proper'. This was intended as its own form of resistance to the dominant mode/s and structures of research conduct and reporting prevailing in the academy as a result of a complex of neoliberal performative 'pressures' (Caretta, *et al.* 2018; *see also*, Davies & Petersen, 2005; Gill, 2002). This choice was, in part, encouraged by the critical insights of postmodernism and poststructuralism which both, in both connected and (dis)continuous ways, provoke us to critically examine received 'wisdom' and the traditionally accepted systems that construct the world, our understanding of it and our subjectivities. In short: I wanted to try to attempt to challenge and work beyond these expectations.

With this in mind, the first section – ***"…opening…"*** (Stronach & MacLure, 1997) – offers a description (and inevitably also an 'account') of the onto-epistemologic ideas and positions that inform my subjectivity, and this work. Simultaneously, though, I try to subvert the imperative for such forms of 'accounting' situated in the onto-epistemic, discursive contexts of postmodernism and poststructuralism. In other words: I try to resist the common practice of providing stable, unitary, coherent, unambiguous and totalising descriptions and definitions that pre-emptively 'account' for who I am and what it is I have done. I wish to try to avoid suggestions *at the outset* that might close off or prevent novel engagements and critiques; instead I want to try to provide an 'opening' that could afford possibilities for such critical engagement by the reader rather than being told how they might 'make sense' of what I present here.

This is intended as a tongue-in-cheek 'account(ing)' of my own understanding of the fields of postmodernism and poststructuralism, including associated theories and perspectives, that I see as underpinning my emerging subjectivity and my engagement with/in this project. My (subversive) intent is an attempt to cynically satisfy the performative imperative to 'define' and 'account for' ourselves and our work, and at the same time resist those imperatives. I offer a reading of the diffuse, overlapping and (dis)continuous 'fields' of postmodernism and poststructuralism that promises no guarantee of stable understandings nor promises to offer a clear "definitions of terms […] [*or*] a map of the route" (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, pp. 1) to guide readers through this work.

<p align="center">***"…Opening…"*** *(Stronach & MacLure, 1997, pp. 1)*</p>

Of course, I am not alone in questioning the idea of providing definitions of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Many authors have challenged the idea of whether postmodernism and/or poststructuralism should, even *can*, be 'defined' as some would wish. St. Pierre (2000, pp. 25), for instance, responds to Constas' (1990) desire to "isolate the elusive nature of post-modernism" (p. 36), uncover its "essential qualities" (p. 40) and "unifying elements" (p. 36) so as to offer "some

clarity" (p. 38) and construct "a metanarrative of post-modern research" (pp. 39) that would be easily "intelligible" and could cut across disciplines and contexts unproblematically retaining its stability and coherence. Citing Foucault's (1971/1972) explanation of archaeological analyses, St. Pierre (2000, pp.25) takes exception to this (and similar) definitional project/s arguing that "statements that are clear and coherent within one discursive formation may not be intelligible within another". "For some reason" she says, "these readers expect postmodernism to be readily accessible and coherent *within a structure it works against*." (*ibid, my emphasis*).

A common touchstone of writings about postmodernism (and poststructuralism) is the notion of refusing stable, totalising definitions and the processes through which such 'truths' and essentialisms might be evoked; "[i]ndeed, refusing definition is part of the theoretical scene" as Lather argues (2001, pp. 3). It would seem at best ironic, at worst woefully misguided, then, to try – *myself* – to provide a definition or definitions of these fields. Of course, there are those who do so, often in the form of lists and/or 'bullet points' that try to circumnavigate the 'core' "assumptions and foci" (Alvesson, 2011, pp. 4; *see also* Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Smart, 2000; Fawcett, 2012) and uses of postmodernism and poststructuralism across the social sciences; but this, to me, is anathema given the terms of the discourses. Lather (2016) provides a subversive critique of this totalising definitional mode in her "top ten+ list" in which she rethinks ontology in the context of "(Post)qualitative research". Lyotard (1984, pp. 81-82) once noted, "[w]e have paid a high enough price already for the nostalgia for the one and the whole" that drives this contemporary need for (definitional) certainty and precision; what MacLure (2006, pp. 224) has referred to as the "rage for closure".

The impetus is understandable, if not misguided. There is an "inertia" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 113; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 38), stability and therefore security, in seemingly 'complete' definitions. Such statements classify, frame and bound 'things' in exclusionary ways to construct specific versions of reality to achieve (at least, the appearance of) unity, stability and coherence so

as to provide a definitive path for action. Stronach & MacLure (1997, pp. 11, *my emphasis*) note:

"…texts that open with definitions, frames and positioning statements *disappoint* by pre-emptively closing off large areas of the space in which they might play."

Definitions, alike the discourses from which they emerge, operate on a principle of complexity reduction and (re)construction; of essential closure/s demarcating the jurisdictions of inclusion/exclusion. *By definition,* then, definitions perform a suppression of the uncertain wherein complexity and contradictions are elided to produce a "mythical" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990, pp. 61) sense of totality, precision and certainty. As Power (1990, pp. 110) once said, postmodernism can be understood, in principle, as "an assault on [*such forms of*] unity."

In *Educational Research Undone: The Postmodern Embrace*, Stronach & MacLure (1997, pp. 1) refuse this prevailing imperative. They suggest that accounts that attempt such definitional-representational-expositional feats will invariably "disappoint if they try to state clearly what postmodernism, etc. 'is', and to position readers securely within the framework of the book-to-come; and they disappoint if they resist doing that". A similar aporia, I believe, exists between the conventional expectations of PhD students in their doctoral theses, i.e. *the need to explain what you have done, justify why they have done it in this way, and arrive at definitive 'conclusions'*, and a desire to be informed by postmodernism and the insights of poststructuralism which trouble such conventions and expectations. As Hodgson & Standish (2009, pp. 310) note: "This perhaps indicates a problem with fully engaging with [*postmodern and*] poststructuralist thought in a field [*i.e. educational research*] where researchers are constantly required to justify themselves." These two impulses are competing (ir)rationalities. Therefore, inevitably, I can only ever 'disappoint' here.

Attempting to (dis)entangle postmodernism and poststructuralism (and, for Stronach & MacLure (*ibid*), deconstruction too), they suggest that if these terms "did have something in common, it would be that each problematises the notion of definitions" (*ibid*, pp. 2) as a response to dominant

assumptions that there *is* (or should be) "an essence of postmodernism, or a reality of poststructuralism, or an identity of deconstruction, to which the words 'postmodernism', 'poststructuralism' and 'deconstruction' correspond" (*ibid*). Part of the reasoning behind this refusal, as I understand it, relates to onto-epistemological positions many consider central to postmodernism and poststructuralist thought. However, I recognise an obvious danger involved in using words like 'common touchstone of' and 'central to' that are contradictory with more overlapping and discontinuous (dis)connections within this 'field'.

In *The Postmodern Condition* – considered a seminal text of postmodernism – Lyotard (1984) reworks Wittgenstein's "language games" (pp. 10) in his analysis of the contemporary struggle for the legitimation of (scientific) knowledge arguing that "**every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game**" (*ibid*) where, in postmodernity, "the goal is no longer truth, but performativity – that is, the best possible input/output equation." (*ibid*, pp. 46). The production of definitions can be understood as one such performative 'move' undertaken in the academic 'language games' in which we participate and collude, through which we produce the/a 'truth' of the world and the objects of our definitions, along with ourselves as complementary 'subjects' of that world. Language, then, is not a neutral transmission media but a performative social practice; a social act constitutive of the very 'things' we represent and enclose in definitions. Further still, it is necessary to position such definitional statements as forming part of embedded performativities in the dominant discourses of academic research, the wider context of HE and the society in which these exist.

Having said this, I want to go on and try to describe, or situate, postmodernism, firstly, in two (contingent) contexts – *first*, as a way of describing contemporary society and its historical development and, *secondly*, as a broad set of philosophies, theories, perspectives, intellectual styles and associated methodological approaches prominent across the social sciences that possess the ability to theorise our postmodern present. Both are important and require the other to 'make

sense', in my view. Following this, I examine the (dis)connections of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Lyotard's (1984) *Postmodern Condition* sets out to identify contemporary society as *post*-modern by focusing on the "condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies […] *as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age*." (pp. xxv-3, *my emphasis*). Lyotard suggests that in the "postmodern age" the nature of knowledge (i.e. how it is conceived, produced and used), and its status (i.e. its purpose and value), has changed as a result of the globalised, market-based, knowledge-driven economy of advanced "late capitalism" (pp. xiv). He suggests that all knowledge, now, has been transformed into a commodity latterly transforming people into consumers of knowledge: "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production […] Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself." (pp. 4-5). Lyotard analyses this transformation in terms of modernity's 'scientific' "metanarratives" – that is, the rules and procedures that construct the legitimacy of what counts as (scientific) knowledge. Alongside the "metanarratives" too, Lyotard identifies modernity's governing principles called "grand narratives" (pp. 15) that provide systemic accounts of how the world works, develops and our place within it. He situates the modern project through the "speculative" and "emancipatory" "grand narratives" of science that, respectively, view knowledge as progress towards universal 'truth' and as driving human freedom "in the service of the subject" (pp. 36). Crucially, Lyotard argues these "grand narratives" have now largely broken down and fragmented, giving way to a ('new') 'postmodern condition'.

He goes on to argue that, given the successive global embedding of capitalist economics accompanying the postmodern shift, the fundamental objectives of modernity's "grand narratives" have lost their power, meaning the "metanarrative" structures legitimating (scientific) knowledge have also been destabilised. This is the postmodern context in which he frames his oft cited "incredulity toward metanarratives" (pp. xxiv). In this, as I understand it, he is signalling the

breakdown of modernity's "grand narratives" and the accompanying loss of power of the "metanarrative" of science in the postmodern condition. He argues modernity's "grand narratives" have been all but replaced by the capitalist profit motive and the logic of performativity. "Simplifying to the extreme" (pp. xxiv), he posits, our/the postmodern condition is one in which the imperatives of capital/ism dominate, meaning knowledge becomes a commodity in service to the demands of markets rather than to human flourishing, primarily.

In just this way, academic research is ordained crucial importance; as it is transformed into a practical tool required to gain a competitive edge amid the global competition for power which is, in effect, a competition *for* knowledge. Thus, the sole rubric for judging the worth/value of knowledge in this postmodern context is through an evaluation of its efficacy to improve the functioning of the whole system – judged through recourse to the operational criterions of efficiency and effectiveness. This is what he calls the "performativity criterion" (pp. 65); the submission of all knowledge to the systemic efficiency principle of performativity judged by (financial) value and efficacy.

Importantly, Lyotard (1984) sets the 'postmodern condition' in a contingent relation to the modern era that (in some ways) might be said to precede it. Postmodern*ity*, in this context, marks a developmental period characterised by a radical 'break' with the objectives of the modern project; by a scepticism and "incredulity" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. xxiv) towards the contemporary "metanarrative[s]" of 'science' (or what Lather & St. Pierre (2013, pp. 630) call 'scientism'). Postmodern*ism*, as school of thought regarding how to understand and theorise such developments in contemporary society, then, seeks to trouble the supposed certainty, precision, 'hygiene' (Law, 2004) and objectivity of 'science' and claims regarding the 'progress' of humankind it purports to sustain.

With regards to education, academia and educational research today, Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern and his conceptualisation of performativity have a familiar, even "prophetic", ring

(Peters, 2004, pp. 37; Locke, 2015, pp. 251). "Simply put", Locke (2015, pp. 248) says, "performativity is the quest for efficiency" thereby undermining any systemic or emancipatory goals of contemporary knowledge production Lyotard identifies with modernity's "grand narratives". Rather, today: "the pragmatics of scientific knowledge replaces traditional knowledge or knowledge based on revelation" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 44). Performativity, in distinct contrast, is coupled to the postmodern 'grand narratives' of scientific reason, instrumentality and efficiency. Locke (2015, pp. 251) argues Lyotard's analysis has "come to full fruition" today, where the postmodern developments he identified can be seen in various aspects of education, noting (*ibid,* pp. 257, *my emphasis*):

> "… there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the type of cultural transference to which schools and educational institutions adhere is precisely that which is governed by the normative aspect of performance*. Performative power, when taking into consideration performativity and performance as constructs of power and knowledge, has reconfigured what counts as knowledge, and what 'rules' knowledge will follow. These rules, when considering Lyotard's notion of performativity, are in keeping with the rules of the marketized, postmodern world, where education has been superseded by the efficient functioning of the wider social system… […]* Education is no longer concerned with the pursuit of ideals revolving around emancipatory themes, but is now more concerned with the pursuit of skills that can contribute to the operation of the state in the world market and contribute to maintaining the internal cohesion and legitimation of that market. *Education, through a new vocabulary of performance, simply performs*."

And, of course, the implications of Lyotard's work Locke highlights impact not just formal schooling and education more generally, but also academic research and the academic milieu. There are various fragments of 'evidence' to support this position, I feel. We can witness the presence of such performative imperatives in the seemingly ever-increasing drive in governmental educational policy towards a greater 'scientization' of educational research that seeks evermore complete understandings of the educative process, its component parts and persons, in terms of the logics of performance. The will being the desire to construct a "science of teaching" (Reynolds, 1998). And,

this is achieved by implicitly and explicitly encouraging researchers to adopt the 'gold standard'

methodology of RCTs (Randomised Controlled Trials) taken from medical fields that,

paradigmatically, are designed for the production of certain, generalisable, representative and

utilitarian 'truths' themselves treated as valued/valuable commodities in that they are required to

'inform' policy and practice decisions (*see* Gough & Elborne, 2002). Obviously, such 'scientific' work

is predominantly positivistic, meaning such designs and 'products' come to be successively accorded

greater/more immediate '(use-)value' from a governance perspective. This is in contrast to

qualitative-interpretive work which, despite its longstanding 'tradition' in educational research, has

experienced progressive delegitimisation. Some claim that, inevitably, this situation will "reduce

[*educational*] research questions to the pragmatics of technical efficiency and effectiveness." (Evans

& Benefield, 2001, pp. 539). Gough & Elborne (2002) even express concerns that the prevailing

imperative of 'quantitative is best', in policy studies at least, may be a method of political control,

citing Hammersley (2001) and Vulliamy & Webb (2001), in making the case that instrumentalism

works to define what questions are important, appropriate and available to ask in the first place

enacting specific closures.

As a result of these governing performative principles, then, dominant approaches to educational

research tend to be hypothetico-deductive, methodologically 'systematic' (i.e. rigourous) and

objective (i.e. unbiased, 'valid'), adopted in order to produce representative and generalisable

'truths' *already conceived* with applicability in mind. These assumptions about research, its conduct

and supposed 'products', then, align with the 'evidence-based practice' imperatives of policy makers

and their proclivity for telling practitioners 'what works (best)' (Hargreaves, 1996; Marzano, Waters

& McNulty, 2005). Howe (2009, pp. 428) has described this as education's "new scientific

orthodoxy".

To me, this situation would seem to give sense to comments – among its critics, at least – that the

use of postmodern and poststructural theories and perspectives in educational research, which

deliberately set out to work against many these dominant discourses and assumptions, are wilfully obfuscatory, nihilistic and unusable in that they provide (*if at all*) minor, partial and inherently uncertain or "unintelligible" insights, as St. Pierre (2000) argues.

With regards to my own work, here, I have tried to incorporate many of these critical analyses and reflections. For instance, while developing a methodologic plan of work, I explicitly sought to diverge the prevailing positivistic and 'mixed-methods' approaches such as the use of large-scale quantitative designs and statistical analyses that characterise scholarship regarding students' completion of their A-Level studies and progressions into HE. From a pilot literature review conducted prior to study planning/approval, I noted extant research tended to rather narrowly focus on comprehensively 'modelling' of student choice behaviours and decision-making processes in HE transitions (Simões & Soares, 2010; Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Briggs, 2006; Foskett *et al.*, 2006; Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004; Price *et al.*, 2003; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Maringe, 2003) concentrating on 'choice factors'. While such understandings are in principle worthwhile, there is a tendency amid these approaches and 'models' to close-down critical discussions through the production of (what appear to be) certain and totalising conclusions. Therefore, a specific desire for me when designing this study was to, firstly, diverge the normative methodological approaches by adopting an in-depth ethnographic methodology situated in a "constructivist-interpretive" paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, pp. 13), and secondly, in doing so, try to offer a critique of the hegemony of such dominant conceptions of and approaches to educational research/knowledge production from within an ethnographic-postmodern-poststructural frame. Thus, I set out here to not only address a methodological gap but also attempt to subvert the expectation of the production of certain kinds of 'products' and definitive accounts to satisfy the neoliberal desire for simple answers to complex issues to support governance. Indeed: my wish was to subvert the very assumption that research is, or should be, about the production of (instrumental) 'products' at all. As opposed to adopting a positivistic or 'mixed' methodology, that might suppose to uncover 'the truth' in their 'findings' to offer readily applicable 'conclusions' in practice, I sought to utilise a naturalistic, iterative, reflexive

ethnographic methodology informed by postmodernism-poststructuralism where the primary aim would be exploration, rather than explanation; eliciting more questions than I suppose to answer once and for all. Like Merrian (1998, pp. 19), my "interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than specific variables, in discovery rather than confirmation." In this mode, dynamically shifting discursive meanings and understandings replace 'truth' and 'proof'. Ultimately, then, my choice of ethnography is a minor act of resistance to the prevailing orthodoxies of educational research and the production of utilitarian 'products' informed by the critical positions offered by postmodern-poststructuralist thought.

As noted earlier, a(nother) way to *think* postmodernism in the context of academic research as I see it, is to consider it a contingent combination in excess of the two instances above – that is, as a characteristically "broad" (Fawcett, 2012) and dispersed term used to denote a diffuse set of styles of thought/thinking *about* contemporary postmodern society, its shifts and historical developments, *and* the nature and status of knowledge, its production, circulation, uses and purposes and ourselves as subjects of this society/'age'. In this sense, postmodern*ism* is not *a* 'thing' but, as I take it, is a diffuse, ever-expanding portmanteau of onto-epsitemological and methodological theories, perspectives and practices that evade clear definition, that do not fit neatly into 'theoretical frameworks' (as is the common parlance in PhD theses), that do not fit easily with one another nor coalesce into a coherent 'field'. Rather, I see postmodernism (and poststructuralism) as already standing in distinct contrast to the prevailing conventional notions and uses of philosophy, social theory and methodology in social science that permit us to look critically at our common postmodern 'present'. It is in this sense that I use the terms and I feel it is in this way that (my understanding of) postmodernism exhibits its deepest convergences with more specific threads of poststructuralist thought.

Postmodernism, as an intellectual 'field', is best thought of as marking a radical shift in thought/thinking towards more critical theories and approaches. In this conceptualisation, it may be

possible (even if undesirable) to align other critical intellectual 'movements', philosophical

perspectives, theories and methodologies with the postmodern and the poststructural as their own

'shifts' – such as feminist theory, queer theory, Marxist critiques, cultural studies, disability studies,

social justice studies, anti-colonialism and anti-racism work, to 'name' only a few.

Another significant matter of consideration, in terms of definitions, is how the words

'postmodern/ism' and 'poststructural/ism' tend to be used somewhat ambiguously; often

synonymously. Though, this is not to suggest I think this is automatically 'bad'. By avoiding the "rage

for closure" that seeks definitive, classificatory separations, I believe this 'confusion' can engender

fruitful 'contaminations' and cross-fertilisations of thought that might unsettle each from within. I

believe 'confusion' is important; it is not something we should treat as an error of reasoning and

explain away, but rather something we should use as creative tensions to explore and expand our

understandings of them, together, to hopefully learn something ('new'). In 'closing' their

introductory "'…opening…'" (*ibid*, pp. 1), Stronach & MacLure argue:

> "The attempt to discriminate among theories and positions, to provide definitions
> and mark off territories prior to engagement, is bound to disappoint, first, because it
> so blatantly oversimplifies what Derrida (1990) calls the 'taxonomic disorder' of
> contemporary theory […] To treat them [*i.e. postmodernism, poststructuralism and
> deconstruction*] as interchangeable would be to suggest that they all 'amount' to the
> same thing, as if they were all manifestations of some underlying principle, or
> available to be 'lifted up' […] where their contradictions would be resolved. On the
> contrary, in a parasitic relationship, things *both* differ and are connected and
> contaminated with/by one another." (*ibid*, pp. 11-12, emphasis in original)

Stronach & MacLure, here, point to the problematics involved in *any* kind of definitional project that

seeks hierarchization and/or classification so as to "defuse the anxieties of postmodernism in a

narrative of resolution and reconciliation" (*ibid*, pp.11) that would feed "rage for closure"

symptomatic of the "taxonomic disorder". Though, even the most astute work as these authors

(*ibid*) note may make identity claims such as, '*feminist poststructuralist*' or '*postmodern feminist*',

that submit one term to a ruling paradigm, methodology or theoretical position, fostering taxonomic performances enacting their own specific closures. Of course, in a doctoral thesis – where students are expected to 'account for' who they are and what they have done – such identifications are difficult to sidestep. Throughout this work I may indeed refer to myself as a postmodern-poststructuralist ethnographer or refer to this work as ethnographic inquiry within a postmodern-poststructural frame, however, in no way by doing so do I want to suggest that I see one as sub- or super-ordinate.

But perhaps, as Stronach & MacLure note above, there are reasons for this 'confusion' – not simply as a result of 'common' theoretical impulses such as the refusal of definition/s and critiques of 'scientific' orthodoxy, but rather because they are both deeply connected and yet, not; overlapping and discontinuous; both the same and different, and neither, simultaneously. As an example: Sarup (1993) comments that there are so many similarities between postmodernism and poststructuralism that it is impossible to distinguish them clearly and unproblematically, while Huyssen (1990), on the other hand, comments that there are so many profound discontinuities that to synonymise them risks misleading and obstructive conceptual blurring. Indeed, "[e]ven the most cursory reading will show that there is an uncontrollable profusion of meanings associated with the words postmodernism, deconstruction and poststructuralism, rather than any kind of consensus over what each means and how it differs, or doesn't from the others…" (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, pp. 11).

With regards to definition/s, what all of this points to, I believe, is a postmodern-poststructuralist focus on discourse and the performativities of *language-in-use.* As Lyotard tells us, "every utterance" is "a 'move' in a game". Thus, when operating in a postmodern-poststructuralist frame, it is crucial that we pay close attention to language in use – i.e. discourse – as a form of performative social practice that produces us, 'reality' and the 'reality' of what we say by examining individuals' talk in context. In this way, as I see it, we take up a number of other onto-epistemic and methodologic positions impacting our research activities.

Firstly, we understand that 'truth' is not embedded 'out there' and innocently available through language but, that meaning is subjectively constructed as it is experienced and performed by individuals and groups. We understand that individuals' meaning-making activities are interpretive processes, individualistic, situated and dependent on the context in which they arise and function, that can and do change over time and situations. Though, it should be noted that from this position, 'context/s' are by no means axiomatic or given, making a central task of a researcher to identify or construct the context in which they interpret others' talk and behaviour – performatively implicating *us* in the very 'things' we report. And, these ideas appears to connect with constructivist onto-epistemologies, and ethnographic methodological understandings, that suppose the social-individual, context-dependent constructions of meaning as well as researchers' complicity in the construction of 'stories' through their interpretive work. As a result, social reality and phenomena are not uniformly understood or experienced but are multiple, often contradictory, meaning therefore that there are many possible constructions and performances of reality based on individuals' subjective experiences and discursive articulations, leading to many possible interpretations that can be made by a researcher. In many ways, this ethnographic mode stands in distinct contrast to more objectivist, positivistic onto-epistemological positions.

Pivoting slightly now, poststructuralism is often taken as deeply connected to postmodernism (even sometimes considered a sub-set *of* postmodernism), but in a rather simplistic way, the two could be modestly differentiated by their relative points of departure. As an intellectual, 'disciplinary' movement, poststructuralism emerged from sustained radical critiques of dominant strands of (linguistic) structuralism such as that which characterised the work of de Saussure and Levi-Strauss, for example. Though, as Fawcett (2012) points out, we must recognise poststructuralism as *much* more than this simple opposition.

Structuralist perspectives viewed language and meaning as something like a fishing net: all signs are knots locked in position in the net and may only derive their meaning from their statically situated, relational position with one another. The poststructuralist response to this suggested, in contrast, that meaning could never be so fixed, so definitively or unproblematically. They argued that signs do not acquire meaning from some 'deep' structure that organises the hierarchical, differential relation of one sign to another, but rather do so in and through ongoing discursive-performative language-use. That is, through talk, we constantly (re)position signs in different relations, in different contexts, and so produce 'new' discursive articulations, meanings and performances. On a structuralist understanding, it was thought that one could identify meaning by identifying the embedded 'deep' structure from which it emerged. However, as the poststructuralists pointed out, this project was/is impossible as any fixation of meaning could only ever be temporary as it is dependent on its use and context, themselves contingent upon other, equally temporary discursive fixation/s.

We could with reasonable confidence, I think, describe Derrida as a poststructuralist in this sense (though, it's likely he would not have agreed). Perhaps most significant among Derrida's insights, relative to poststructuralist theorising on language and meaning as I see it, is the concept of 'dífferance' which he used to reject structuralist notions by arguing that meaning could only be produced by a perpetual juxtaposition – 'play' – of sign/signified contingent upon the discursive contexts of their use. The principle idea/s driving this concept could be said to underpin aspects of poststructuralist informed work that takes the view that meaning is *never* fixed or stable, but is performatively, discursively constituted and constitutive, in constant 'play', transforming in and through use.

What Derrida points us towards, then, as qualitative researchers who primarily deal with 'text' (in whatever form/s), is a focus on the performative dynamics of language (use), (inter)textuality and discourse/discursivity in terms of world-making. When meanings are and can never be fixed but

instead are always free-floating, dependent on use and context, we can no longer rely on

representation and positivist notions of essential 'truth/s' waiting to be excavated in our analytic

work through the signification of the words of our participants – and nor, importantly, can we rely

on the stability of (our own) definitions. This is because these statements are, unavoidably,

discursive and performative; they do not *re*present an 'out there' (Law, 2004) reality or some-'thing'

within that reality uniform to all, but are particular subjectively embodied *performances of the world*

emergent from the discourses and subject positionings that condition us. Rather, in our research,

following Derrida we pivot to interpreting meaning *in situ, in context*, *in use*, concentrating on the

multiple, contradictory discourses/discursive practices that produce the temporary fixations of

meaning we report, further attending to how these shift and change. Derrida's (1976, pp. 158)

famous expression – "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" – translated by Spivak as 'there is no outside-text',

(or "there is nothing outside of the text") highlights such a position:

> "…if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately
>
> transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that
>
> is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the
>
> text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language,
>
> that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in
>
> general […]. There is nothing outside of the text…" (*ibid*)

Derrida's famous phrase, here, is often misunderstood (among his critics at least); his idea reduced

to a simplistic claim that there is nothing but 'text', ironically, understood literally (*see* Searle, 1995).

Though, Derrida's claim as I take it, is that there is nothing outside of discourse and (the

performativities of) *language in use*; maybe more specifically for him, nothing "outside of the

writing" (Derrida, 1976, pp. 159) and interpretation.

This is the kind of thinking that animated critiques of ethnographic and anthropological inquiry and

authority, such as those offered by Clifford & Marcus (1986), Marcus & Fischer (1986) and Nicholson

(1990), labelled the "crisis of representation" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, pp. 252) that came to be subsumed under the 'linguistic…' or 'postmodern turn'. This "crisis" and 'turn' marked a fundamental breakdown of correspondence theories of truth – the idea that we could unproblematically, completely, without slippage, *re*-present an 'out there' reality we had apprehended with our corporeal senses and research instruments, and report it to others in writing. Of course, this is not the position I take.

Two other things merit briefly discussing in relation to this and Derrida's thoughts above, first, regarding writing and secondly, regarding presence/absence. Derrida (1976, pp. 159, *my emphasis*) argues, there is nothing "outside of the writing" as "that what opens meaning and language *is writing* as the disappearance of natural presence".

Firstly, when there is nothing "outside of the writing", when we focus on the performativities of language in use, we exchange an analytic approach and interpretive focus on uncovering a/the 'truth' in peoples' talk for a focus on discourse and interpretation. If we ascribe to a performative-discursive view of the world, then we have no recourse to representation but must concede that "discourse is all there is" (Butler, 1992, pp. 3) and acknowledge "there is [*and can*] only [*ever be*] interpretation" (Denzin, 2017, pp. 12) indicating our own imbrication in the performative construction of what we subsequently report. It is important to understand that discourse is not only what is (not) said, but also how it is said within a specific social context (Archer, 2000) *and* the system that enables or constrains this, along with the subject positions that may be made available. As noted, language is "a form of social practice" (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 20); it is performative; it 'does things'. Our primary analytic material – i.e. individuals' talk; 'stories' – then, are instances of discursive-performative 'language in us' that construct the world, not represent it. And while discourses are produced within specific contexts, they are also in part constitutive of those context/s too and, equally, continue to be shaped by those contexts dialectically meaning a(ny) discourse

cannot reasonably be understood de- or a-contextually (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Thus, the primary analytic 'method' I employ in this work is critical discourse analysis drawing on 'Foucauldian' and Faircloughian insights and approaches. And, in this respect, I understand critical discourse analysis as "as much theory as method" (see also Fairclough, 1992, 2001b) where the 'stories' students and others tell about themselves and their experiences highlight the discourse(s) in which they participate, are positioned, produced, speak and through which, they too are spoken. Because "language is situated in society and also creates society" (Hoang & Rojas-Lizana, 2015, pp. 3), choosing a discourse analytic 'method' and attending to 'stories', discourse and performativity allows us to apprehend "'world-making' through language" (Usher, 1997, pp.31). It is towards an understanding of students, parents and other stakeholders 'world-making', the 'society' or 'culture' they construct, the subject positions they adopt and enact, the discourses they pick up and modify to make sense of themselves, their educational experiences and (what lies ahead in) HE that are at the heart of this project.

Secondly, with regards presence/absence, the postmodernists and more so the poststructuralists offer critiques that subvert positivist and humanist onto-epistemological assumptions still prevalent in contemporary conventional approaches to qualitative(-interpretive) methodology. For instance, St. Pierre (2014) mounts a critique of the (in)compatibility of postmodernism and poststructuralism with contemporary, conventional qualitative methodology/s drawing on materialist-poststructuralists Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1987, pp. 23) to propose a contradiction between conventional qualitative work using postmodern theories:

> "There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)."

Deleuze & Guattari (*ibid*), here, highlight a poststructuralist-materialist view on the inseparability of the ontological and the epistemological. Indeed, as I see it, one of the fundamental *critical* contributions of my work here is in subverting the routine separation of ontology from

epistemology, from methodology, from ethics, etc.. From a performative perspective, it is somewhat

absurd to try to dissociate ontology from epistemology, from methodology and so on. It does not

seem possible to enact these separations because of the necessary contingency of our embodied

and enacted understandings of reality (ontology), our understandings regarding knowledge of or

about that reality (epistemology), and the processes and practices by which we produce such

knowledge (methodology); all are mutually constitutive to my mind. It is for this reason that I try to

harness critical reflexivity as analytic 'thinking tools' in order to examine the practices, processes and

ultimately, performativity of my own research conduct. Relatedly too, in another subtly subversive

move, I also treat my own reflexive commentaries as another form of 'data' *about* research itself. I

do this to destabilise the idea that the 'data' we collect is *always and only* about substantive

interpretive issues separable from matters of onto-epistemologic and the methodologic processes

we engage in to construct 'data'.

St. Pierre (2014), above, also argues that on this understanding we can no longer privilege *presence*;

the 'being there' of our conventional face-to-face, naturalistic/ethnographic method(ologie)s,

suggesting we need to be suitably critical about ourselves and our practices of knowing when

working from a postmodern and/or poststructuralist frame. St. Pierre (*ibid*) suggests 'presence' is

never really present in these naturalistic modes because, for example, when we collect data in the

field using our senses or electronic instruments and write fieldnotes, what is actually required is

textualization – showing that 'pure' presence is never 'truly' possible; never present. This leads St.

Pierre to argue that there is no reasonable basis for researchers to treat some words differently than

others; privileging some and not others based on 'pure' presence such as, the words of our

participants compared to those of our own reflexive commentaries. Again, for me, this brings the

necessity of criticality and reflexivity into sharp relief. Because we cannot make recourse to pure

presence to prove this *is* what was really said or what really happened, and because such statements

are discursive and performative calling forth the very 'things' we suppose to *re*-present, we must

treat all statements and utterances in the same way – critically – including our own.

Likewise, the notion of absence/presence also, for me, resonates with postmodern and perhaps to a greater degree, poststructuralist notions of identity and subjectivity – which may also dovetail with the insights of post-human and 'new' materialist ontologies. Again, St. Pierre (2014, pp. 15, emphasis in original), citing Deleuze & Guattari (1991/1994, pp. 18), is instructive:

> "…if I understood that all permutations of the verb *to be* (I am…) are no longer thinkable because they imply stasis, permanence, *presence* […] I understood that any "I" I call forth "designates only a past world ('I was peaceful')" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991/1994, p. 18)."

Similar among postmodern and poststructural perspectives, as well as post-human and 'new' materialist perspectives, are problematisations of static notions of being, presence and identity – we could say existing along a continuum, respectively, from least to most radical. Postmodernism emphasises a focus on performativity, discursive subjectivity/subject formation and the 'death' of the supposed autonomous, rational, individual meaning-making subject of classical liberalism. Instead, following Butler (1990; 1997; 1999; 2004), the focus is on the performative production of persons as particular kinds of 'subjects'. Postmodern views of identity suggest a decentred and eccentric, fragmented, discourse-constituted subject – and, because people are indeterminately positioned by and partake in a number of simultaneous, often competing discursive systems, each producing a different version of 'reality', there are consequently many subject positions available leading to transformative effects on subjectivity and identity. For Butler (*see* 1999, 2004), in her feminist-poststructural analyses, the focus is on the 'ordinary language' involved the discursive formation and regulation of the 'body' and performances of gender that constitute how we come to conceive and understand ourselves, the world, and who or what may be possible and intelligible within that world. As Butler argues, the 'subject' is formed, and forms itself, via ongoing interaction in the world through multiple, stylised and repetitive iterations of *intelligible* speech and behaviour

given the prevailing 'regimes of truth' – and it is in this iterative process that change occurs, posing serious questions to conventional notions of the subject, being and identity as static.

Poststructuralist views of 'self', in a simple sense, contend there is no such 'thing'; that there is no essential, stable or immutable core 'self' that exists across social situations and contexts instead focusing on a decentred notion of the subject and identity that continually changes in relation to context emphasising subjectivity/subject formation as fragmentary and influenced by complex social-relational and biographical discursive forces constituting our experiences and *sense* of 'self'. Persons, or rather 'subjects', therefore, are locked in a constant struggle for the (temporary) determination of their identity with different subjectivities continuously manifesting, disintegrating and manifesting anew through competing discourses and performance of various subject positions.

At its most radical end, as I have it here, posthuman and 'new' materialist ontologies push poststructural critiques of 'self', subjectivity and identity further still and completely rupture the *a priori* ontological category of 'human' itself. It is on this issue that St. Pierre (2014, pp. 15) questions the (in)compatibility of *humanist* qualitative methodologies with postmodernism and poststructuralism:

> "Given that humanist descriptions of human beings organise and structure the concepts and practices of conventional humanist qualitative methodology, why do even those of us who say we do 'post' work nonetheless cling to that mode of being and its ontological commitments? Why do we continue to rescue humanist concepts and practices from the ruins of that methodology and think they will work in post-qualitative inquiry?"

Both St. Pierre and Patti Lather, separately and together (*see* Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), have over recent years offered sustained critiques of conventional qualitative(-interpretive) methodologies advocated from within more radical poststructuralist positions and attempt to provide a basis for engagement with what they, and others, call 'post-qualitative' research. In this, they advocate a

critical and reflexive vigilance and, in effect, abandonment of the (routinely unarticulated) humanist commitments underpinning much contemporary qualitative educational research – especially those utilising postmodern or poststructuralist thought.

Maggie MacLure (2006, pp. 224) refers to postmodernism's "dubious gift" to educational research and methodology as the ability: "…to unsettle the still core of habit and order in the uncertain hope of shaking things up, asking new questions, estranging the familiar." It is this act of attempting to look critically at the "all-too familiar" (*ibid*, pp. 229), of "making the familiar strange rather than the strange familiar" (Van Maanen, 1995, pp. 20), by attempting to estrange ourselves, that will "force us to think again, and more slowly, about what is taken for granted" (*ibid*) in educational research and theorising. To do this is to "engage [*the*] anti-Enlightenment forms of theorising that embrace the 'disappointment' of certainty (MacLure, 1997, pp. 4-5)" that Stronach & MacLure (1997) note, and that I seek to follow in my own way.

Drawing this "…opening…" to a close, what I hope I have achieved, here, is very little; I hope I have offered an 'account' of the elements of postmodernism and poststructuralist theorising that has uncomfortably, uncertainly and indeterminately situated this work and myself, by refusing to define things clearly, offering multiple gaps, contradictions, fissures and openings for readers to critically engage with and, in part, begin to 'make their own sense' of my work. I have tried to follow the lead of Stronach & MacLure (1997) by engaging in a politics of 'disappointment' in refusing to say what 'is'/'I am' because "it is only by attempting such a departure that it is possible to question the assumptions which a discipline or field takes as self-evident" (*ibid*, pp. 3). Indeed, this 'departure' is a significant impulse driving my critical engagement in and with this project. Rather than provide clarity and certainty at the outset that would lay down a path for readers to follow, my aim is/was to complicate, challenge and produce problems/problematisations rather than provide answers, against the dominant expectations; to engage in a "politics of refusal" (Garland, 2013, pp. 375); a strategy I am confident *will* 'disappoint'.

2.0.1.   Project Planning & Institutional Methodological Approval: *'The best laid plans of mice and men…'*

The first, and most significant, institutional requirement doctoral students must navigate is the development of a plan of work, based on their initial applications, known as the *RD9-r* at LJMU. Personally, I dedicated myself to this singular task – so much so in fact, that I became totally immersed in it leading to the development of a highly detailed methodological plan. Importantly, the message is that researchers should *know* what they are researching, and how, before they start. But of course, during this planning process there must be a trade-off where uncertainty and ambiguity must be exchanged for precision and clarity.

In retrospect, I felt I was allured by the comfortable idea that if I formulated a sufficiently detailed plan of work that my thinking about methodology would be 'complete'. All that would be required in the field, I thought, would be to follow my own methodologic road-map to avoid deviations or detours. 'If I spend *enough* time planning well beforehand', I thought, 'everything will go according to plan, and there will be no surprises in the field'.

I believe my thinking, here, was broadly positivistic in character. This pattern of thinking and working implies an arrogance on the part of the researcher who believes their own mastery. It also implies that the world, and the people therein (including ourselves) – *the subjects and objects of our studies* – exist 'out there' (Law, 2004); that they and the world are essentially static and will sit still as we enact our (largely) plans. It is a rather sad irony that, from Masters' study, I was already familiar with the idea of iterative research design and how theory *and* practice of ethnographic field research are often organised around the idea of an emergently shaped design or methodology. Nevertheless, through my engagement with these institutional approval procedures, I felt I was 'sucked into' the rhetoric of 'complete' forward planning; crystal ball gazing effectively. In reality, then, I can see now how I was enacting a particular performance *of* research by, at least initially, believing I could plan ahead unproblematically and further positioning myself, hierarchically, as the 'knowing expert' at

the centre of this inquiry, above and beyond the world. Devoting myself to planning in great detail, toiling over the forms for months, I found myself believing their 'lie' and colluding in their/*my own* governmentalizing distortions; maybe even becoming the 'lie' myself.

Of course, there is a sense of comfort and shelter in plans. Something like qualitative-interpretive social research appears much easier, that is, less uncertain and ambiguous, when it is understood as a matter of technique where the task is to follow a road map; a set of prescribed directions. Plans provide comfort in their *seeming* completeness and assumed clairvoyance; they can also act as crutches, appearing to prop us up in times of challenge by telling us what to do, when and how. In this way, formulating highly detailed methodologic plans can diminish one of our most valuable research tools – our capacity for critically reflexive engagement *with* the processes of inquiry itself. Plans can also shelter us, at least in the short term, from the inescapable complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability of the social world that may vex our conventional approaches to methodological praxis and traditional ways of knowing.

Inexperienced doctoral students, like myself, can often become so immersed in planning and tied to their intellectual progeny that it can become quite difficult to think 'outside' or 'beyond' them, let alone change them. As such, our thinking and practice/s in the field can become very firmly grounded in relation to the assumptions undergirding our initial plans and the conventional practices of planning. I certainly felt this way. The idea of having to change plans, even during planning itself, can feel deeply uncomfortable and even more so once we are 'in' the field. With this very real possibility in mind, I felt an impending sense of dread that I might erase my progress to date and end up back at 'square one' if I felt I did need to go back and change tack. Additionally, the process of study approval can take months such that the prospect of having to change and re-submit plans to institutional committees is simply not one many students wish to entertain – for a number of reasons, such as fixed study and funding time frames meaning delays may pose significant risks of late submission or even non-completion due to lack of time and financial resources. Much later in

the field, though, when my plans seemed to be drifting further away I began to reflect that, in part, I had colluded and been the principal architect of my own illusions.

As I hope to explicate throughout the following sections, I feel these are typical of the kinds of performative effects on subjectivity brought about by standard institutional systems and procedures predominantly framed by a neo-positivistic or quantitative concept of research/knowledge production and researchers. They are the quiet, malign side effects of our unavoidable positioning by these dominant discourses and the mandatory requirement that we play the institutional 'doctoral research game' abiding its governing rules and procedures. That is, through our necessary engagement in, and imbrication with, the discourses and practices underpinning our institutional procedures we are produced, and perform ourselves, as certain kinds of researcher-subjects enacting a very specific conception of research corresponding with their prevailing rationalities.

It was only after completing the *RD9-r* procedure, and securing methodological approval, that I was slowly able to begin to appreciate the deeply embedded positivistic logics undergirding the discourses and practices of research planning which give license to and, perhaps for a time at least, seduce more inexperienced researchers into believing ethnographic field research can be a simple matter of following a road-map. But, this is the dominant mode of research conduct at the institutional level that carries a positivistic set of onto-epistemologic and methodologic assumptions that are routinely unarticulated, perhaps even unnoticed, but against which much of our thinking must take place.

It was only after my plan of work had been approved, and the study could begin in earnest in the field, that I was able to 'step back' and realise how I had been seduced by the (positivistic) illusion of control, certainty and completeness – and how I had unavoidably colluded in this. It was only in the doing – or, at least, *in the attempted enactment* – that I came to realise there was so much I had not accounted for and had taken-for-granted. Later, I realised there was, epistemically, so much I *could not* have known to think or plan beforehand. The social world and the people who inhabit it, in my

admittedly limited experience, are much more diffuse, messy, complex, unpredictable and largely

indifferent to our plans than we might readily like to believe when sitting at our desks. On this point,

it may not be too much of a stretch to liken aspects of institutional research design planning and

approval to clairvoyance or crystal-ball gazing. Researchers must remain continuously cognizant that

their prior ideas and pre-figured plans are perhaps never more than the best educated 'guess work'

we can produce at the outset prior to entering the field, interacting with people, gathering data and

interpreting that data. And, to be sure, the dominant mode of research planning has performative

effects constructing us, in specific ways, as certain kinds of researchers who believe that, practically,

we can know it all or enough in advance to plan. Further still, these discourses 'do us' too. They

position and produces us as the 'knowing expert' that can become problematic when we realise just

how far off our 'guess work' truly was; how little we really 'knew' to begin with and how little we

truly have control over such that we are radically disabused of our 'illusions' in contact with the field.

Though, it was the illusion of control, certainty and completeness in the practice of planning, I feel,

that had seduced me and that would continue to prove challenging to *un*-think and *un*-do in the field

and my emerging subjectivity leading to numerous problematic issues I shall explore throughout.

2.1. Ethical Planning & Approval

At long last, weary from the administratively and bureaucratically onerous *RD9-r* procedure, I had but one more hurdle before beginning fieldwork – *applying for ethical approval*. In the same ways as research planning procedures, institutional practices of ethical approval are shot through with dominant discursive conceptualisations about research that define not only what 'ethics' *is*, what it means to plan and conduct a study 'ethically', and what it means to be (or perform oneself as) an 'ethical researcher', but what constitutes 'research' itself. The routinely accepted practices, forms, standard procedures and approval systems complement each other to the effect that they construct an image of the world, and people, as essentially fixed, knowable in totality in advance, following standard ethical 'rules', and as such is controllable for *a priori* to fit the dominant discursive rationalities.

As with all discourses, their systems of meaning achieve (the appearance of) unity and coherence as much by what is included as by what is necessarily excluded into the overflowing field of discursivity. Thus, we can say that the dominance, or hegemony, of any discourse is achieved through a reduction of possibilities achieved through a series of (temporary) closures. However, discourses are open, permeable systems and their apparent unitary constitution is always under threat from what has been necessarily excluded (*see* Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). And while this is not a problem in itself, as I have found, problem/s *do* begin to emerge from the tensions between the practice of ethics/ethical planning at the institutional level and the practical business of conducting ethnographic research ethically in the field*.*

Much of the work of qualitative-interpretive researchers, perhaps particularly those engaged in ethnography and perhaps even more so with regards ethnography situated or aligned with postmodern and/or poststructural frames and perspectives, appears largely unaccounted for in the dominant bio-medical version of ethics structuring procedures and standard accepted practices at

the institutional level. As Punch (1994) stated with comical correctness more than 20 years ago, in this sense, perhaps "we are all still suffering for the sins of Milgram" (pp. 89).

One glaring problem in this field relates to the question of iterativity and, emergent design and methodology. Law (2004) argues that similar to discursive formation/constitution, detailed but uncritical articulations and uses of methods operate on the principal of complexity reduction. In LJMU's institutional ethics forms, for instance, I was required to include a list of *all* "questions you are going to ask your participants" during interviews or focus groups so they could be vetted by the approval committee. This, of course, is quite contradictory to many prevailing ideas about ethnographic inquiry; it is highly divergent to even our most common-sensical ideas about a conversation – developing over time between two or more people, according to situation, circumstance and importantly, context. How could we ever know such things to answer these questions in advance if, as part of the very fabric of our methodologies, we intend on entering the field, in part, to find out what is relevant and analytically necessary *to ask* in the first place?

During planning, I felt a strong urge to try to remain methodologically flexible and open during the early stages of fieldwork so as not to unduly close off nascent possibilities that may emerge before I even began. I wanted to be attentive to the field, to my participants and their perspectives, to the emerging data, so I could be led more than lead. But, again, I felt I *knew* this would be insufficient to secure ethical approval.

Later as fieldwork progressed and I was soon knocked off balance by abounding ethical and political 'dilemmas' in the field, I came to feel that an odd paradox sits at the root of these institutional procedures and associated standard ethical practices. They are, in different places and ways, both highly specific and highly general simultaneously. Students must be methodologically explicit, definitive and unambiguous in their ethical submissions, such as in detailing data collection activities, providing questionnaires, lists of interview questions, specifying our methods of analysis and interpretation, and so forth, in order for the 'ethicality' of their designs to be evaluated. Being

highly specific, then, becomes discursively connected with notions of control, completeness and certainty; to 'knowing'; to the mastery of knowing and the predictive power of reason. In these ways, again, we construct the world in specific ways and perform ourselves as the 'knowing expert'. However, the kind of specificity frequently requested and given in many ethical applications (*such as my own*), I feel, is a performative fabrication; a phantasm, or "simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1994/1981) of what research 'is' (perceived to be) or might be. And, curiously, these fabrications and 'illusions' help little when we are confronted with ethical problems at the spontaneous and unpredictable interactional level of the field, our observations and unstructured/semi-structured interviews and conversations, for example.

What I feel I have learned is that these conventionally accepted, standard practices and procedures, in their apparent certainty and completeness, instigate a form of intellectual blindness, or myopia – much in the same way as the governmentalities of methodological planning in the *RD9-r* structured my thinking about and enactment of methodology, positioning and producing me in complimentary ways. Being asked for specifics and providing them, then, progressively desensitizes us to complexity, unpredictability and the possibility of what we have not, and could not, have thought to think in advance. In this way, we can be easily thrown off balance when things almost *inevitably* do not go exactly to (our own) plan(s). Moreover, the discourses of ethics and standard ethical research practices, produce us as certain kinds of 'ethical researchers' imbued with certain moral priorities and imperatives that align with their governing rationalities that perhaps compound our 'alienation' (*see*, Kruger, 2018; Snaza & Weaver, 2014) from the people and contexts constitutive of our inquiries.

2.1.1. Applying for Ethical Approval: (more) Forms and (more) Procedures

Much in the same way as I felt I had been seduced by the positivistically inflected governmentality of methodological planning in the *RD9-r* procedure, the microscopic and unambiguous nature of ethical submissions compounded with the subsequent recommendations made by the committee I was

required to incorporate led me to believe (for a brief moment) that, once approved, the slippery and vexing business of ethical thinking was 'complete'.

Laclau & Mouffe (1985, pp. 113) argue that discourses have "a weightiness and an inertia" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 38) – certain historically/culturally contingent ebbs and flows in which we are all caught up. At certain times, in certain contexts, there are vast areas of firmly embedded discursive "objectivity" and naturalisation that often make it nigh-on impossible to think, speak or do beyond their jurisdictions. Such is the power of discursive practices and structures, like the ritual of applying for institutional ethical approval, which not only produce the unequivocal objects of ethics in detail through their necessary exclusions but also, on these bases, produce for us an equally restricted horizon for possible thought and action. These are instances of the sedimentation of powerful discourses and practices that circulate in institutional networks of individuals over time.

2.2. Beyond Stamps of Approval: *Recruiting Schools*

Recruitment is common to most forms of social research involving people yet "despite its crucial significance" to the conduct of inquiry, "it has not always been awarded the attention it deserves" (Troman, 1996, pp. 72). There appears relatively little in-depth practical guidance or critical scholarship regarding gatekeeping and access negotiations to assist doctoral researchers in this difficult but commonplace activity, and even less in the context of recruitment. Troman (*ibid*) argues that researchers should produce critically reflexive accounts in and of their experiences in the field to facilitate closing this gap and the development of more refined praxis. Indeed, in-depth reflexive accounts of this sort are rather rare. Troman (*ibid*) cites Shaffir, *et al.* (1980) and argues this paucity "can probably be accounted for by researcher elation at finally gaining entry, quickly giving way under the pressures of data collection and analysis once the field is entered." (pp. 72).

I feel, related to this 'absence', there is a large and perhaps unwarranted faith and expectation regarding the willingness of people to participate in our research. While *we* are highly enthusiastic about our work, we cannot automatically assume others will be too.

In my methodological and ethical submissions, I detailed how institutions would be approached and recruited. Firstly, I would compile lists of potential institutions from publicly available information on local educational authority (LEA) website/s, and following this, shortlist institutions to be contacted initially by e-mail or phone to invite participation. Once participation and access were granted, in principle, from senior leadership teams (*hereafter* SLT) and a dialogue had been established with gatekeeper/s, contact would proceed in-person. I thought that, once schools had been approached, recruitment would be a relatively routine affair.

I compiled lists of potential participating schools based on inclusion/exclusion criteria detailed in my ethical application and this rubric produced a list of over 20 schools in the greater Liverpool area from which, initially, I wanted 3 – 1 'traditional' secondary school with 6th form, 1 upper-secondary grammar school and 1 FE (Further Education) college (as per original *RD9-r* plan).

I also thought it wise to compile basic information about these institutions from their own websites to help decide which sites showed the greatest promise as data collection venues. Almost all websites I visited during this exercise showed high levels of similarity in organisation, content, language, tone and design. Anctil (2008) noted, with regards to university choice, visiting institutional websites has become customary for students (and parents) when gathering HE information, with many viewing this virtual interaction as the first contact with, even 'visit to', the university itself. The same could be said of school choice at the secondary level where many school websites now appear markedly similar to university websites.

Simultaneously, I thought about more practical-logistical issues such as daily travel time. It is commonly understood that long-term ethnographic inquiry can be an arduous endeavour for the researcher who is, without question, the "primary research tool" (Ball, 1990a, pp. 157). As such, the ethnographer must personally suffer the embodied and experiential vicissitudes of long-term immersion in the field, interactions and relationship building with the persons of our research often seen as a condition of gathering 'rich' data – this is, perhaps, what animates common 'definitions' and conceptualisations of ethnography/ethnographic fieldwork in terms of prolonged 'time in the field', or 'deep hanging out' as Geertz (1998) once put it (*see also*, Rabinow, *et al.,* 2008, pp. 116; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004, pp. 535; Hammersely & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 3; Wolcott, 1995, pp. 77). Ball (1990a, pp. 157), as such, warns that ethnographic study, then, is one high in "risk, uncertainty and discomfort".

2.2.1. Struggles Recruiting

Shortlist at hand, I set about contacting institutions by e-mail and phone. I briefly introduced myself, the project and its aims believing recruitment would be relatively simple. After all, in my mind at least, I had already 'completed' all the difficult 'thinking work'; however, problems soon surfaced.

My phone calls were answered by secretarial staff who requested I send relevant information, but in the same breath, said they had no power to process my requests. All they could do was to pass information on to the relevant people. Recognising this pattern early, I decided to gather names of SLT (Senior Leadership Team) members and Heads of 6th Form to better direct my requests. However, I was rarely put through to these 'powerful' individuals and suspected the messages I left were undelivered or ignored.

I waited a few days and contacted each of the institutions that had seemed the most friendly and helpful. And, indeed, I did slowly begin to develop a dialogue with *some* people. But, at the same time, I worried I was becoming an annoyance; though equally felt I had no choice but to persevere.

During one of these second calls, a secretary told me that while individual members of the SLT might have the authority to talk to me about my requests, it was unlikely any member of a SLT would be able to act as gatekeeper – in the sense of granting access to the school. On another occasion, while speaking with a Head of 6th Form, they mentioned that while they would be personally happy to approve access, this was not a decision they could make alone. They informed me that any requests for long-term access must be approved by the SLT as a whole; and, furthermore, it was unlikely a request for access by a researcher would be deemed an institutional priority meaning it may take several weeks or months for requests to be handled at the appropriate level.

I started to worry that precious time was slipping away on a task I naively assumed would be simple. Being continually thwarted, I began to see for the first time the stark limitations of my pre-planning efforts and the taken-for-granted, unarticulated assumptions that underpinned this work. But, I decided to reflexively explore my 'failures' to try and reconsider and change my tactics.

2.2.2. Changing Tac/k/tics

Fig. 1.0. Recruitment Leaflet (inner matter, front/back matter respectively)

First, I decided to widen my search to include institutions across the North West of England.

However, considering restrictions on travel time, only a handful of additional institutions were

included. I, then, considered perhaps a failing of my original approaches was they were too

impersonal, and therefore, much easier to ignore. I thought a more personal, face-to-face approach

may garner more success. Troman (1996, pp. 72) suggests a key aspect of securing access is a

researcher's ability to "successfully *'sell'* their research" (*my emphasis*) and themselves to potential participants. In this vein, I decided to produce a colourful, 'glossy' advertising-information leaflet laying out key information about the study and what participation would entail – shown above in *Fig. 1.0.*.

I hand-delivered leaflets to the most promising institutions I managed to maintain (limited) contact with. However, the same sorts of problems emerged. The only people I was able to make contact with were secretarial staff who assured me my leaflet would be delivered to the appropriate staff. Sensing a pattern, I asked if I could make an appointment with a member of the SLT and/or members of the 6th Form leadership team so I could talk face-to-face with them. These requests were either denied outright or secretaries said I would be contacted back to arrange meetings but unsurprisingly, no contact materialised.

It also seemed my plans to 'personalise' recruitment, to 'sell' myself and my research, were being thwarted by a range of structural-institutional factors. For instance, when I entered schools from the street, I was never allowed beyond the front office. Despite showing LJMU credentials, confirmation of ethical approval, and enhanced DBS clearance, I was not allowed into school buildings due to child protection and safeguarding policies. In fact, I was told I wasn't even permitted to be on school grounds without institutional clearance for these reasons. Only once did a member of 6th form leadership speak with me in the front office and collect my leaflet. After a short conversation where we agreed to speak again, no further contact occurred despite my tactical persistence.

I delivered the leaflet to 8 schools in the Liverpool area and none responded. After a week, I decided to call these schools to ensure information had been passed on. However, only one school confirmed they were aware of my request – the same school where the staff member talked to me in the front office. I was running out of ideas but felt there was something else I could try. I contacted some former PGCE colleagues of mine, many of whom were at this time teachers around the North West of England. I worried about the ethics of potentially 'abusing' personal relationships

to 'get a foot in the door', as it were, but was unsure how else to proceed. I thought that perhaps a a connected problem with my initial approaches was that, in large measure, I was unknown. Schools did not know who I was as a researcher or as a *person*. Shaffir & Stebbins (1991, pp. 29) state "entering the field and cultivating rich relationships are attributable mainly to the *researcher's personal attributes and self-presentation and to others' judgements of him or her as a human being*" (*my emphasis*). Since I was having trouble even establishing contact in order to "cultivate rich relationships" in the first place, I considered friends, acting on my behalf, may be able to vouch for me personally and professionally, mitigating the 'unknown' of me and my proposed study.

I contacted five friends/acquaintances from my PGCE training course, all of whom said they were happy to 'pass it along' to a colleague they felt most confident would be able to handle my requests. But, alas, only one of my former classmates contacted me back – *Francis.*

Francis first apologised for his failure to secure participation on my behalf and then talked about the difficulties he had encountered. He told me that after conversations with his department head he was still unsure who to direct my requests to. I thought the best place to start may be the Head of 6th Form, who might agree in principle then bring this to senior management. *Francis,* then, contacted me again saying he could not find anyone in the 6th Form leadership willing to take on the responsibility due to workload and time constraints. At this stage, I was getting very worried that the entire study was hanging in the balance.

By this time in the academic calendar, schools had ended for the summer so no further progress could be made. Nevertheless, I resolved to stick to the task and try again once schools returned. I reassessed my initial methodological desires and designs, now attempting to recruit just *one* institution so data collection could begin even if not per the original plan. What I would come to learn was that opportunities often arise in the most unconventional places and unexpected times and, it would seem that no amount of planning can account for (generative) chance.

2.2.3. The unpredictable generativity of chance

In the enforced hiatus of summer holidays, I set about identifying educational conferences and events to attend hoping I might meet people I could 'sell' the project to. I prioritised attendance at events with a focus on HE, first and foremost, to be more assured people in attendance would be professionals involved with HE support in their own institutions.

One conference, "*Progression to Russell Group Universities*" jumped out at me. The event, held at the University of Liverpool, was delivered by the educational support organisation *Advancing Access* and billed itself as designed for educators and school leaders to develop and enhance strategies for supporting students' applications to Russell Group Universities. contacted organisers to request attendance. As before, I was somewhat uneasy about the ethics of this tactical move. After discussing a number of ethical issues with my DoS (Director of Studies), we resolved attendance at these events would not be, in principle, unethical and that perhaps there were things I could do to ensure I was acting ethically, honestly and transparently.

Firstly, it was important to acquire express permission to attend this 'professional' event from organisers informing them of my motives. Secondly, it was important I, in no way, deceive anyone about my identity and requested organisers mark me as a 'PhD Student Researcher' affiliated with 'Liverpool John Moores University'. Thirdly, I would be taking notes at the event and those notes *may* be used as part of my PhD and requested consent to such data collection. Furthermore, I assured event organisers that if I did collect data from attendees, I would acquire their personal consent for use of data. Having provided organisers with these basic ethical assurances, I was granted permission to attend.

Enthusiastically arriving early, I tried to strike up conversations with attending professionals. I dressed and conducted myself 'professionally' in an effort to align myself as 'one of them' and not a

detached academic. I introduced myself as a 'PhD Student Researcher' stating my reason for being there was, primarily, for the purposes of recruitment. Many people were happy for me to join them and even seemed keen to ask questions about my research, sharing their own ideas and experiences. All but one of the teachers at my table told me they were leaders of 6th Form and/or Head of Careers Guidance at their respective institutions.

During the conference, I engaged the professionals at my table in conversations about the information we were being exposed to, and how this might assist their work. In part, this was a tactical move to get people talking about their schools and experiences of supporting students' progressions to HE and also to cement a perception of me as an interested, competent and conversant 'professional'; as a de facto 'teacher' and 'one of them'. During lunch, I approached 3 people individually and asked if they might be willing to consider participation. All three seemed eager, even enthusiastic, to participate – perhaps due to the amount of time we spent together during the day, the growing rapport we had built up and the volume and detail of information I was able to communicate about participation. All three gave me their personal *and* professional e-mail addresses suggesting I contact them formally with a request for participation they could forward to their respective SLTs. At the end of the day as I was readying to leave, one of these individuals – Jason – from a large 6th Form college suggested I visit his institution to get a better sense of the nature of HE provisions in place.

2.3. Success…?

At last, I had three leads to pursue! I felt especially optimistic about Jason and *Brook College.* Jason and I had sat beside each other and spent a considerable amount of time talking during the conference. We engaged in light-hearted conversations, sharing details about ourselves and our lives outside work. Supporting my growing confidence further, Jason casually mentioned that *Brook*

College had previously permitted researchers' access and this engagement with academic scholarship was something they were particularly proud of.

I was quietly hopeful Jason would advocate participation to his SLT colleagues, and I would finally be able to begin data collection. At the end of the day, I gave Jason copies of participant information sheets and consent forms as per common opening field 'ritual', where he told me he would bring these to the following week's SLT meeting/s. Having swapped e-mail addresses and phone numbers, we arranged a visit to the college when they returned from summer break.

Whilst I had high hopes for *Brook College*, the wounds of initial failures were still fresh. As such, I also pursued contact with the other two professionals from the conference. However, once again, neither responded.

Troman's (1996, pp. 75) experiences in recruitment and access negotiations are eerily similar to mine:

> "On several occasions heads, who had been [*initially*] enthusiastic about my research [...] told me that they would put my request to the Senior Management Team (SMT) and if they agreed then permission to research would be granted. Many of these apparently enthusiastic heads phoned back to say they had done this but their SMT had been unwilling to have me in the school [...] when they phoned me back they could then deny entry but continue to proclaim their enthusiasm for the project whilst laying off responsibility for the refusal on to the SMT, a body, of course, whom in these circumstances I had not been given the opportunity to meet."

Of course, most of my efforts didn't make it past e-mails and phone calls. Those individuals I did manage to contact were not "heads", members of "SMT"s or teachers. Relatively speaking nowadays, head teachers are elusive, almost mythical creatures, rarely seen outside institutional corridors of power. This would be reinforced at *Brook College*, where the Principal, Mr. Gray, told me he liked to conduct a weekly "walk round" (FN9, pp. 17) of the college, yet, during my time there

(*over a year and a half*), I saw him only twice. In reflexive notes long into field work I still had not

seen this elusive figure and even questioned "if he even exists at all*"* (FN9, pp. 16). In fact, 'head

teacher' may be a misnomer now considering many have no teaching duties. There are many

reasons for modern-day principals' elusiveness, mostly tied to fundamental changes in the

organisational structure of schools/colleges and their leadership, making their role more akin to a

"chief executive" (*ibid*, pp. 82) than an educator.

2.4. Failure is the best teacher

Temporarily 'concluding' this section, I think it worthwhile to note some of the centrally important

lessons I learned from my challenges and dilemmas – *failures* – in methodological planning and

enactment, especially in recruitment.

I was slowly beginning to realise that I had taken a lot for granted in initial plans. All the pre-planning

in the world could not have accounted for the moments of chance or serendipity, the kindness of

friends and the productiveness of reflexivity, which proved to most generatively progress the

research, my thinking and my fieldwork practices. I was quickly coming to realise that people are

largely indifferent to researchers' plans; and social reality knows no fealty to them. I had naively

assumed that the production of a detailed plan of work represented some kind of 'guarantee', and

that my methodological (thinking) work was 'complete'. But, this was a performative,

governmentalising "illusion" (Bauman, 1993, pp. 32) emergent of the institutional procedures I was

required to engage in that unavoidably positioned and produced me.

And so, with only one participating institution hopefully 'recruited', aspects of the original

methodological plan necessarily required amending. In the following section, I explore the most

significant of methodological transformation – *resituating to case-study*. I will return to the specifics

of negotiating access and fieldwork in *Brook College* after a temporary 'diversion' back into more

formal methodological reflections.

2.5. Methodological Transformations

2.5.1. What happens when 'nature punches back'?

Alicia Youngblood-Jackson (2013, pp. 743-744) quotes feminist-materialist-poststructuralist Susan Hekman (2010, pp. 22), who suggests:

> "Sometimes experiments go according to the scientists' expectations and sometimes they do not. When they don't, when matter resists, the scientists must deal with this resistance and adjust their concepts accordingly. In other words, nature "punches back," and scientists must deal with these punches."

As outlined, recruitment was acutely challenging in many ways though, serendipitously, I met Jason and was able to begin the process of recruiting *Brook College.* I still tried to recruit other institutions per the original plan, but with no success. So, my initial methodological plans necessarily needed to change to account for this exigency; nature had 'punched back', in a manner of speaking.

My original plan of work outlined something like a 'comparative' methodology – proposing to collect data in three different types of institution to compare the experiences of students, staff and parents, and explore how students might be differentially supported and positioned in different kinds of organisations.

On reflection, I realised my original desire for 3 different institutions bore traces of positivistic styles of thought that I now felt had colonised aspects of my methodological thinking through a focus on breadth and comprehensiveness, perhaps reflecting subconscious 'beliefs' about the need to 'get out ahead' of issues of validity and/or generalisability reflecting the fact that my thinking was still very much grounded in these positivistic understandings of research. I felt aspects of my original methodological planning drew from discourses of triangulation; attempting to validate whatever assertions I might make by comparing and off-setting three dissimilar cases. The logic of

triangulation is confirmation, rather than exploration; but, I had nothing to 'prove'. And yet, strangely, this is how I planned my study unaware of the positivistic trappings subtly 'imprisoning' (Deleuze, 1968/2004, pp. xv) my thinking and doing, forming me as a researcher-subject who planned their study *in these ways*.

It was only by coming in contact with the field that I realised my plans were based on some problematic unarticulated assumptions. Through critically reflexive engagement with my methodological 'failures' and problematics to date, I started to appreciate that some significant methodological (re)thinking and alterations were required. The most notable of these methodological alterations, necessitated by 'nature punching back', was resituating to a case study approach.

2.5.2. Case study: *Resituating the methodology*

Just as there are as many definitions of ethnography as ethnographers, there seems an equal array of definitions of 'case study'. This is because case study research is generally regarded as a poorly differentiated methodological approach given the descriptor is often used "interchangeably with ethnography, field study and participant observation" (Merriam, 1985, pp. 205). Bogdan & Bilkin (1982, pp. 37) note the 'thing' differentiating ethnography from case study is "the framework of culture […] as the principal organisational or conceptual tool to interpret data". Though, while important, this seems a slim distinction at best as it depends on the many subjective and varied definitions of 'culture'.

Despite the relative paucity of consensus about what constitutes case study methodology or approach, two people seem to dominate thought – *Robert Yin* and *Robert Stake* – and they lie at (roughly) opposite ends of the spectrum of description regarding what case study involves. Stake's

(2005, pp. xii) perspectives and approaches focus less on strictly defined concepts and adherence to prescriptive methodological practices. In the introduction to *The Art of Case Study Research*, he says:

> "I prefer certain ways of proceeding […] Many with experience in case study research do things differently. I will try to *emphasize the arbitrariness of the methods* from chapter to chapter, but *I encourage you readers to be alert for tactics that do not fit your style of operation or circumstances. Before you is a palette of methods. There are many, many ways to do case studies.* I like those described here."

Stake's reflexive "ways of proceeding" appealed to me. He frames his methodological handbook as eclectic "palette" of primarily qualitative-interpretive, naturalistic approaches and methods which we, depending on an "alert" and critically reflexive appraisal of our needs, purposes and circumstances, are invited to refine based on what we see as the "most fruitful" (Aul-Davies, 1999, pp. 71) ways to proceed in the context of our own inquiries. And, even as Stake attempts to persuade readers, there is no imperative that to be counted as 'doing case study', we need to follow his suit.

Stake (2005) focuses attention on the evolving character of naturalistic inquiry, stressing the iterative, emergent and "progressive focusing" (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976, Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 207) quality of on-going fieldwork, analysis & interpretation. It was for these reasons I chose to adopt/adapt Stake's (2005, pp. xii) perspectives and "ways of proceeding".

Accepting that *Brook College* was my sole research site, I reformulated the methodological plan conceiving case study as a 'research strategy' (Yin, 1981), or "design frame" (Thomas, 2011, pp. 511), embedded in and complementary to the larger ethnographic methodology. Though, this decision was not as simple as declaring '*I'm doing a case study now!*'. Because of initial 'failures', I found myself in "a position of perpetual critique" (Allen, 2012b, pp. 3) now assuming "everything is dangerous" (Foucault, 1983, pp. 256). I was starting to learn, everything in my evolving methodology

required more on-going thinking to get a sense of how I might proceed, in this context, using a case-approach. Some authors suggest one of the most important tasks is to begin thinking about *what is the case?* Or, *what is this a case of?* Below I comment on my responses to these ideas.

2.5.3. Case Study Approach: *subjects & objects*

Case studies are normally 'defined' by their subject/s and object/s. George & Bennett (2005, pp. 6) state, "the investigator should clearly identify the universe – that is, the 'class' or 'sub-class' of events – of which a single case or group of cases to be studied are instances". Thomas (2011, pp. 514) argues:

> "The case that is *subject* of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomenon that provides an analytical frame – *an object* – within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates" (*my emphasis*)

The *subject* of case study, i.e. *the specific 'thing' being analysed*, then, is someone or something which may belong to a (larger) *class* of similar or related persons, practices and/or phenomena. The larger *class* or combined *sub-classes*, then, constitute aspects of the "analytical frame"; that is, *object/s*. Thomas (*ibid*), however, cautions *subject/s* can be variously conceptualised:

> "The subject is in no sense a sample, representative of a wider population […] Rather, the *subject* will be selected because it is an interesting or unusual or revealing example through which the lineaments of the *object* can be refracted. In this, its scope is not restricted: As White (1992) points out, the subject may be as broad as Lenin's analysis of peasant social formations, or as narrow as one of Goffman's smiles" (*emphasis in original*)

Stake (2005, pp. 1-15) typologises case *subject* as "intrinsic" or "instrumental". In the former, choice of case is axiomatic; that is, we study one case to understand *that specific case*. An "instrumental" case, on the other hand, focuses on studying one case to understand something about other case*s*

or a generalised issue to which a case pertains. That is, we *use* a case "to understand something else" (*ibid*, pp. 3).

Furthermore, as Thomas says, *subject/s* can be codified in a variety of ways, i.e. "typical" (*ibid*, pp. 4), "key" (Thomas, 2011, pp. 514), "deviant" or 'extreme' (Lijphart, 1971, pp. 692). The ideas of "key" and "deviant"/'extreme' cases immediately seemed to appeal to my critical sensibilities. A "key case", for Thomas (2011, pp. 514), possesses something of "inherent interest" (*ibid*) relative to the object/s. Something which is thought to be, in some ways, interpretively illustrative or exemplary of the analytical object/s. However, we must critically interrogate subjective ideas of 'typicality' or 'key-ness' (or 'deviancy' and 'extremity') in the contexts of our own work. A 'key' case, for example, cannot be said to be representative of a larger population. Therefore, to position our choice of case as "typical" or "key" is ultimately arbitrary and based on the researcher's decisions and rationalisations. The validity of one's case choices must, then, derive from an on-going reflexive engagement in/with the relationships between researcher-subject-object and the process/es of inquiry, considered contingently evolutionary (*see* Tillema, *et al.*, 2008).

Object/s, by contrast, are not so easily typologised. Certainly, we do not come to our studies with no ideas. Most normally our *object/s* will be 'decided' in advance in doctoral applications and methodological plans following the embedded institutional dictum: *how will you know what to do if you don't know what you're studying?* However, in as much as object/s are usually defined before fieldwork in 'research questions', we should not uncritically accept these as necessarily and permanently fixed. Instead, following the rationality of iterativity and emergent design, we should leave our *objects* (*our questions*) open to change through inquiry.

While *I* certainly 'defined' research questions prior to fieldwork, the true apprehension of my *object/s* did not become clear until late in the composition of this thesis. It is helpful to remain mindful of the inevitable methodological failures and transformations necessitated in the move from

the desk to the field, and back again, and how these unavoidably shape research aims. Mills &

Morton (2013, pp. 43) argue design should be "a constant weaving back and forth between

conceptual framing and the intellectual problem at issue" meaning our "research questions and […]

can and should change over the course of a project." Furthermore, they note "[t]his is why setbacks

are so […] often at the heart of ethnography"; they provide "transformative moment[s]" (*ibid*).

Thomas (2011, pp. 514, *my emphasis*) cites Ragin (1992) who assents this view suggesting, "it will be

this *analytical* focus that crystallizes, thickens or develops as the study proceeds: It is the way this

'object' develops that is at the heart of the study". Becker (1992) too insists inquirers constantly, in

the light of continued data collection and interpretations, ask themselves *what is this a case of?* The

'answer' may not emerge and settle until long after fieldwork as has been my experience.

I am convinced it is beneficial to leave such choices and decisions about framing subject/s and

defining object/s provisional for as long as possible, allowing them to crystallise through the

reflexive, iterative conduct of our inquiries. We may only be able to provide temporary answers to

these questions by doing, reflexively exploring our actions and then pausing to 'define' them in

writing.

2.5.4. Conceiving a case study approach

Grounding this thinking in my own work, then, means the object of this study became understanding

the changing nature of HE in the UK within a neoliberal context of an increasingly marketized,

commodified, metricised, performative, 'consumerist' sector, including the social identities of

students as they navigate progression into HE. It could be said, then, I have chosen various subjects

to refract and illuminate aspects of these object/s, such as *Personal Statements* and *The A-Level*

Mindset. I viewed my analytic-interpretive choice of subjects as "instrumental"; that is, chosen

because they were (potentially) "an interesting or unusual or revealing example through which the

lineaments of the object" (Thomas, 2011, pp. 514) could be illuminated.

2.5. 'Getting in': *Brook College*

After the *Advancing Access* conference, Jason and I maintained contact via e-mail. He intimated he hoped *Brook College*'s participation "could help improve […] advice and guidance to students and parents [*regarding HE*]", highlighting Troman's (1996) argument that it behoves researchers to "'sell'" their studies to potential participants.

Indeed, I tried to foreground what I saw as the importance of the study and the *potential* benefits of participation, not exclusively for *Brook College* – though, it is perhaps in this well-intentioned, democratising offer that things started to go wrong, and that would prove much more problematic than first thought later in these negotiations and throughout the study as a whole. I responded to Jason's comment above that I wished to democratise inquiry where possible by sharing emergent study 'findings' and involving participants in aspects of analysis and interpretation, commenting: "…everyone who participates will be given the opportunity to avail of the cumulative knowledge of the project in some way given its scope, depth and person-centred approach. Feedback of the emergent findings and final report conclusions will be an important element, and I do hope it aids you in developing more targeted support and provision, for students, parents and staff alike" (*e-mail*, 10/6/17). On 17/6/17, Jason, then, contacted me to say: "the management team [*were*] [sic] happy for the college to be involved." At this stage, I also offered *Brook College*, given Jason's comments about 'improving advice and guidance', the opportunity to engage in a conversation, after its completion, about the study's 'findings' and how the college might use these modest insights to improve, adjust or change college practices and provisions. And again, while this is a common approach in many studies that require the diversion of significant investments of persons, resources, time and/or energy from participating institutions and organisations – *such as long-term ethnographic inquiries* – I feel, this was precisely where problems regarding the perceived instrumental use-value or what *Brook College* felt they would have access to following study completion, originated and that would continue to 'play out' througout negotiations. In this respect,

the practice of proposing and/or offering benefits and 'feedback' during or upon a study's completion, while attractive in the context of 'selling' ones research to secure access and consent, may also become the seeds of future discrepancies between the perception/expectations of the researched and intentions of the researcher regarding the purpose and outcomes of a study, their potential utility/applicability and what the researched feel they may have access to.

At any rate, one institution had *finally* been recruited. All that was left, I thought, before data collection could begin was to negotiate access. However, in reality, this was just the beginning of a long and vexing process.

Jason also added at this time, "they [*i.e. "senior managers"*] suggested I get [sic] in touch with you *to find out more about what the data collection would involve*" (*e-mail*, 17/6/17). Of course, by this stage, Jason and I had spoken many times about the project's methodology, and he was already in possession of participant information sheets and consent forms. However, due to the decontextualized nature and 'alien' language of these documents, it was rather hard for Jason and *Brook College* to understand what participation might actually mean for them 'on the ground'. Certain ideas and phrases seemed to cause Jason some anxiety – in particular, 'participant observations' and my use of the term 'critical'.

'Observation' is a common term, but a notably loaded practice, in education. Teachers are regularly observed both internally and by external agencies, often related to school inspections, teaching/teacher evaluations, and 'shared best practice' or continuing professional development (CPD) exercises – themselves, overtly politically controversial. The term 'observation' in education draws on a different set of discursive registers than in its more research-specific sense. It stands to reason, then, when '(teaching) observations' are often used within new managerialist systems of performance management and accountability, that educators can be understandably nervous when the idea and practice is invoked. In this performative-political context, requests from researchers to

'observe' can seem, to schools of a "'siege mentality'", as "another outside agency to protect […] staff from." (*ibid*, pp. 75). As a result, the methodology of participant observations needed explaining explicitly.

It was during these ongoing discussions that I became more keenly aware of the discrepancies regarding expectations and 'outcomes' of the research, i.e. *what 'outcomes' did the SLT think they would have access to, and in what form?* Below is the e-mail I received from the college's Vice-Principal approving access:

> "I have discussed with Mr. Gray [*Principal*] and we are both very happy for you to continue with your research […]. We would be keen for you to share any findings with us, so that we can make use of any possible *AFIs* identified." (Mrs. Morgan, e-mail communication, 2/12/16)

The acronym "AFI" means 'Areas for Improvement' and perhaps shows, even at this early stage, how the college in part perceived and understood what I was doing and what was 'in it' for them. Reflecting on the starting points of these negotiations now, I can now see that in my initial offers to democratise the processes of research, involve participants and importantly, give the college access to 'findings', I was constructing/performing the project in a way that constituted the discrepancy between what I intended on producing and what they thought I was producing. Essentially, these offers led the college to believe – understandably I would add – that I would be producing institutionally 'useful' conclusions and recommendations they could operationalise for improvement. In this sense, this relatively innocuous offer, I now see, actually drew on dominant neoliberal, performative discursive conceptions, understandings and expectations of educational research in terms of its relation to discourses of institutional progress and improvement through 'evidence based practice' (*see* Hargreaves, 1996) that constructed the research in an, essentially, utilitarian fashion. This situation may provide some contextual sense to Sriprakash & Mukhopadhyay's (2015) interpretations of researchers as "brokers" of knowledge – where the

intertextuality of "brokers" with regards to financial investment agents should not be lost on us.

Hodgson & Standish (2009, pp. 310, *my emphasis*) state very clearly: "The nature of thought in

educational research is [...] hemmed in by a policy imperative: that research *must be* useful."

At any rate, access negotiations were underway to my great relief. At this stage, e-mails and phone

calls no longer seemed appropriate to continue negotiations, so they began to take place exclusively

in person.

2.6.1 Access Negotiations: *Data Collection & Analysis*

2.6.1.1. Participant Observations

As noted, Jason asked exactly what '*participant observation'* meant – i.e*. what and who I would be observing and why? how, and in what, would I be participating?* and *what would I do with the data*? It was during these conversations I felt I formed a keener understanding of the positionality of *Brook College* giving rise to their specific methodologic 'concerns'. Jason's and my access conversations, while challenging, would prove illuminative of wider aspects of the college's institutional culture and subjectivity which assisted *continued* ethical-political negotiations throughout fieldwork.

I informed Jason the primary foci of participant observations would be, broadly speaking, following students through their A-Level studies and applications to HE; and secondarily, following staff supporting students in these activities. However, these were difficult ideas/practices to render into specifics as I explained that the questions guiding the study, and practices by which it would be conducted, were likely to shift and change as data collection and interpretation progressed *iteratively* – another concept/practice difficult to explain in 'lay' terms. Therefore, it would be nearly impossible to state with any certainty beforehand where participant observations might focus and where they might lead.

I also explained that in *participant* observations (as opposed to 'pure' or 'teacher' *observation/s*), I would try to take part in the activities of students and staff and (try to) become an "active member" (Adler & Adler, 1998) of the college by participating and experiencing things first-hand. Attempting to make the 'method' of participant observation more intelligible to Jason (as a teacher; as a non-researcher; as a non-*specialist*) I likened it to the kinds of observations and interactions one might expect of a "trainee teacher" (FN1, pp. 16-18). Explicitly responding to his nervousness, I assured him participant *observations* would in no way pursue evaluative judgements of teachers or teaching practice in the conventional professional sense of 'inspection'.

I told Jason all participant-observational fieldnotes would be handwritten leading him to ask about the *form*s of data collected – i.e. what type of participant-observational data would be collected? Would direct quotes be collected, and would they be attributable? etc. I noted data collected would be textual, prosaic, interpretive, largely unstructured and include a mix of direct observations, descriptions of individuals, activities and practices, direct quotes (verbatim as far as possible), reflexive memos, 'found' field artefacts alongside researcher-generated photographs and preliminary interpretive ideas. I explained handwritten fieldnotes would be typed-up and elaborated as soon as possible after collection to ensure 'accuracy'. Transcripts would then form the primary raw data for analysis, later supplemented with interview data treated in the same ways.

I also assured Jason that when collecting data, firstly, my notebook and transcribed notes would always remain in my possession, and secondly, that individuals' real names would not be used while collecting data to ensure anonymity through use of pseudonyms. As such, specific persons would not be (readily) identifiable from raw *or* processed data, and quotes would not be readily attributable. Furthermore, I assured Jason data would not be shared with other parties involved in the research. Of course, these are ethical responsibilities; however, as I have noted thus far with regards to involving participating institutions and offering 'benefits' of participation and found out first hand, some these 'standard' practices are not without their inhering problems.

Attempting to describe my proposed methods of analysis and interpretation to Jason – namely, *critical discourse analysis* – my explanations were, necessarily, tentative and may have appeared vague and uncertain. Given my growing postmodern and poststructuralist persuasions leading to a wariness of definitional sureties, I found it difficult to specify the 'whats' and 'hows' of my approach to critical discourse analysis. I tried to explain, *in a 'lay' manner*, that data would be examined using a form of in-depth, critical and theoretically-informed inductive textual analysis to explore the discourses, and meanings, implicated in individuals' articulations of any given context, practice(s) or

their lived experiences. However, my descriptions and explanations faltered. Jason still wanted to know what I meant by 'critical' in this context.

In the same senses as 'observation' is polysemic and politically charged in education, so too, is the term 'critical'. 'Critical' in everyday conversation conjures notions of *criticism,* whereas in research terms, 'critical' relates more to the academic notion of 'critique'.

Jason was keen to clarify what *I* meant by *critical* analysis, and by virtue, what *I* meant when I described myself and my research as *critical*. Sensing his nervousness, I assured Jason my work would be critical in the sense of trying to offer grounded *critique/s* of current educational discourses and practices as they related to students' completion of their A-Level studies and subsequent thinking about, and progressions into, HE using *Brook College* as an illustrative 'case'. Smyth & Shacklock (1998, pp. 2-4) describe criticality like so:

> "One of the more concise straightforward explanations of what it means to operate critically has been provided by Robert Cox (1980), when he said: '[To be critical is to] stand apart from the prevailing order of the world and ask how that order came about' (pp. 129). […] *The intent is to engage in a constant questioning…*" (*my emphasis*)

Importantly, my work would engage in *critique*, not criticism – a "constant questioning" of the discourses, systems and problematics by which current social practices and understandings of HE are constructed, circulate and experienced but not an attempt at "fault finding" (*ibid*) or 'blaming'. I assured Jason *critique* would not be directed at *Brook College* specifically, 'personally', nor its staff or students. Instead, I wanted to focus on the *discourses, structures, practices, meanings* and *subjectivities* implicated by students and other relevant stakeholders at *Brook College*.

It is worth noting that ethical communication, or informing, of this sort conducted at the outset of a project during access and consent negotiations is not always as unproblematic as it may seem. As academics, we should be mindful of the fact that oftentimes the common discursive language of

research we all readily use and understand does not necessarily translate easily for practitioners –

and this is perhaps particularly evident in our research vocabularies which include philosophical,

socio-theoretical and methodological terminologies and concepts. The language of (educational)

research(ers), in which participant information and consent documents are written and through

which we 'speak' our projects to potential participants, even if uncomplicated for a 'lay' or

practitioner audience, may still be largely alien to many professional educators. In fact, they are

likely to be alien to most but researchers themselves. As an example, Gregoriou (2004) comments on

the "insecure" notion of "[i]dentifying one's self as a philosopher of education" because, she argues,

"what philosophers and educators have to say does not seem to interest each other." (*ibid*, pp. 236,

my emphasis). She further hypothesises that no "common language" (*ibid*, pp. 237) exists between

philosophers and sociologists of education and educational professionals resulting in "disjointed

conversations" (*ibid*, pp. 237) where neither really understands nor values what the other has to say.

And, this may be especially the case when the work we conduct may not actively or directly facilitate

institutions to pursue their own improvement by producing utilitarian findings or recommendations

for practice. We might also nervously ask ourselves if the identification 'educational researcher' does

not suffer a similar aporia relative to professionals, as Gregoriou notes.

There is also another potential issue, here, regarding how a researcher communicates their projects

and, therefore, how they might perform their work and themselves as certain kinds of inquirers, or

people. There is the potential, I think, for the conventional (discursive) vocabularies we use to speak

about and communicate our research to participants to alienate the researcher from the researched.

For instance, even in my 'lay' descriptions to Jason I was unavoidably using 'specialist' research

language and terms that required unpacking and explaining as we went along. This undeniably

shaped the relational power dynamics between Jason and myself; that is, I was performing myself in

ways that positioned me, in a hierarchical fashion, as a 'specialist', as the 'knowing expert' or the

detached academic perceived to have little knowledge of or concern with the experiences and

priorities of practitioners themselves thus, alienating me from those I sought participation from. I think this created a 'distance' between Jason (*and other staff*) and myself as 'professional' and 'researcher' respectively that consequently led to problems in the researcher-researched relationship and negotiations throughout fieldwork.

Indeed, a brief interaction that took place during an interview with one of the college's heads of 6th form, Christine, while we discussed the college's new teaching and learning agenda – The A-Level Mindset – I feel, highlighted this "distance" between researchers and practitioners:

> Christine: […] You always feel that… They're not - sometimes you can get people who have… [pause] like, it's all theory and you think, *where's the practice?*
>
> R: You can say educational researchers, I won't be offended. [*laughs*]
>
> Christine: No, no, it's not even just researchers. I'd say people who do training and who write books and things *for teachers. Some of them you just think, even though they are or used to be teachers themselves, there's a sense of… [long pause]*
>
> R: Well, that's something I was thinking as you were talking… I know whenever I was doing my PGCE and started teaching practice, and by no means was I in the classroom for as long as you have been teaching, but you'd often go to conferences, or seminars, and there'd be 'academics'; frequently people who used to work as a teacher but don't any more, and they talk in…
>
> Christine: *That's it! That's it!*
>
> R: …often they talk in abstracted or highly theoretical terms, and I would come out and feel really good about it, but then go, 'So, what do I do with this? How do I put this into the classroom? How do I put this into practice?'
>
> Christine: Yeah! Exactly. That's exactly it. *There's this feeling of distance; they're just a bit out of touch… it's like, 'yeah, that's all great, but how do we do it now?'*
> [IT1Christine – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 7, *my emphasis*]

Christine's final expression – "…'yeah, that's all great, *but how do we do it now?*" – implicates how she at least conceives the purpose, 'outcomes' and value of educational research in relation to classroom, pedagogical practice first and foremost. And, it should be noted, these same ideas and

perceptions emerged in many conversations with a range of teaching and non-academic staff across the college.

At this stage, though, Jason seemed a little more at ease. However, in the coming weeks, we met many times to discuss these and other aspects of the study the SLT continued to express "concerns" (FN2.2, pp. 45-47) over. Particularly, these related to the involvement of parents (in the context of my self-confessed criticality). Jason asked what I planned to talk to parents about. Of course, reiterating my methodologic approaches, I noted it was practically impossible to answer with any specificity and certainty. Instead, I noted I would talk to parents about their beliefs, attitudes and opinions about HE, and their experiences of supporting their children applying to HE.

However, this was not quite what he asked. As he continued to express the "concerns of the SMT" (FN2.2, pp. 45) (note the discursive shift: "*leadership*" (SLT) to "*management*" (SMT)), he asked how I intended on using data gathered about college practices when speaking to parents. Initially, I took the question to relate to participant privacy and anonymity; however, Jason eventually clarified the college's 'concern' was that I may instigate conversations with parents leading to inaccurate and/or unfair *criticisms* of the college. He stated:

> "…not that we've ever had any negative comments from parents mind you, but, say you are talking to a parent and asked something like 'Do you think the college could do more?', *we'd just be worried about that*…" (FN2, pp. 45, *my emphasis*)

Essentially, the "concerns of the SMT" revolved around pre-emptively protecting themselves from the potential threat of a 'critical' researcher (*an 'outsider'*) which may result in criticism from parents. I wondered if this was perhaps precisely the reason *Brook College* never "had any negative comments from parents" – because they seemed very cautious about the information parents had access to.

It does not seem far-fetched to consider the college was acutely aware of 'impression' management. Walford (2005, pp. 88) argues:

"Now that there is increased choice of school and competition between schools for students, head teachers will [*often*] try to avoid any possibility of damaging the image of the school…"

Walford suggests, in this neoliberal "climate of accountability" (*ibid*), a researcher offering anonymity could be very attractive indeed. However, as Walford points out, if a school is shown in a positive light, they may choose to revoke their anonymity to reap the benefits of good 'PR'. *Brook College*'s behaviour, I believe, draws on the neo-liberal rhetoric of organisational transparency and responsiveness, particularly evident in new managerialist discourses now common in education. Though, given Jason's comments, we might argue these are "simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1981/1994), i.e. performances which hide the very fact nothing of the kind exists. When the relative success of a school today is based, in part, on institutional perceptions of democratic openness, progressiveness and progress among parents impacting choice many may try to engineer or control their public images in certain ways. In this sense, Jason's comment – 'do you think the college *could do more*?' – I believe, is telling; even more so, I think, when read in conjunction with the college's perceptions of what may have been 'in it for them' in terms of the 'outcomes' of this work they could instrumentalise to "do" and be "more".

The "concerns" of *Brook College* all point to a form of institutional anxiety emerging from a potentially threatening macro-political discursive context of performativity. Alike corporations, appearances and perceptions are considerations of paramount importance to schools (now). While the college in one breath projected an image of transparency and 'embraced' formative feedback for progress, as is the neo-liberal vogue, in the same breath, they were palpably nervous about what I might say *about the college* to parents and what the fallout may be. Feedback, it seems, is only good as long as it's good.

2.6.2. (not really …) **The end of access negotiations**

Thus far Jason seemed happy with my responses to the college's "concerns" and so, I had been tentatively given the 'green light' to begin data collection by senior leadership.

Following initial negotiations, Jason and I agreed a date for me to attend the college to begin familiarising myself with institution, tentatively begin data collection and 'complete' the process of securing formal institutional consent. However, far from being the end of the dilemmas related to access, consent and the politics of inquiry practices, this was only the beginning.

Throughout fieldwork and after formal consent had been granted, Jason and I met frequently to revisit issues related to the politics of inquiry as a result of initial *and* emergent "concerns". These issues became a persistent thorn in the side of fieldwork, requiring ever more complicated negotiations and concessions extending practically until my exit from the field. Though, again, this highlights another aspect of ethics and research politics I have found is widely taken-for-granted in standard institutional procedures. Signing a consent form, in itself, does not represent a permanent covenant or state of affairs nor marks the end of a researcher's ethical obligations.

The result of months of negotiations with *Brook College* was that significant aspects of the proposed methodology required amendment before consent would be approved. For example, member-checking procedures were added to address data and interpretive 'accuracy' (especially with parents), alongside periodic institutional study updates and a final debrief. The overall result, required in order to secure consent, was the production of a pseudo-contractual codification of researched and researcher rights and responsibilities relative to aspects of data collection and use, and 'ownership' of data and interpretive accounts, formalised in the document *Principles of Procedure* (*see,* Appendix 1). This document functioned as a more institutionally sensitive adjunct to existing ethical documentation. And, at this stage, with both parties right and responsibilities enshrined, months after data collection had already begun, the college saw fit to finally formally approve access and consent.

6.2.3. Beginning to Begin

For now, though, I was pre-occupied with my first data collection visit to *Brook College*. In e-mails arranging this, Jason suggested I spend most of my time with him until I got a sense of the college environment, timetable, etc. In the days leading up to this event, I experienced an odd, destabilizing mix of excitement, optimism, uncertainty and doubt. This was now the only school who had agreed to participate, and I felt an intense pressure to make the most of this opportunity.

I found some relief in taking refuge in methodological literature around ethnographic data collection, and reflections on the politics of inquiry in the field. I also gathered information about *Brook College* from various online sources and felt determined to try to 'know' as much about the college as possible in advance in order to (at least, appear to) be prepared and 'professional'; again, performing myself as a 'professional', as 'one of them', to foster an air of authority or respect in the field through deploying my stock of socio-cultural capital (*see* Rowe, *et al.*, 2019; Sorrells, 2016), and positioning myself as a 'specialist', the 'knowing expert' at the heart of this inquiry. The following chapter describes the opening stages of formal data collection in *Brook College* and the various challenges, dilemmas and problematics I encountered.

2.7. Entering the Field

2.7.1. Roles, Affiliations and Associations

The day of my first trip to *Brook College* had arrived. The plan for the day included being formally introduced to members of the college's 6th Form A-Level Pastoral Support Team – known as *Pastoral Mentors* – followed by a tour of the campus. Following this, I was scheduled to sit in on Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons with pastoral mentors and their respective pastoral tutor groups.

The night before I couldn't sleep, ruminating on what the next day might have in store. For instance, when I first met Jason at the *Advancing Access* conference, I had long hair. In the interim (and on the advice of my Mother because '*teachers don't have long hair*') I'd cut my hair and wondered if Jason would recognise me. I worried over my choice of clothing too. I didn't want to look like a member of staff, but at the same time, I wanted to look 'professional'. This, of course, as I understand now, was a performative balancing act that could never reach equilibrium to satisfy both simultaneously as identity – or perhaps, "identifications" – is/are understood as a "construction, a process never complete" (Hall, 1996, pp. 2) but always fragmented by our positioning in multiple, competing discursive systems; constantly "in process" (Harrison, *et al.*, 2003, pp. 61); not a 'thing' but a performance, a 'doing' to utilise a Butlerian term, an "incessant and repeated action of some sort." (Butler, 1990, pp. 112).

It was only much later that I spent some time thinking about why I did, or felt the need to, perform myself in these ways. Highlighting the ideas of Shaffir, *et al.* (1980) and Shaffir & Stebbins (1991, pp. 29) (also highlighted by Glazer (1978)) noted earlier on researcher "self-presentation", I began to see my concerns and subsequent actions as deliberate attempts at constructing (i.e. performing) what I felt would be an appropriate researcher identity; an identity that would be conducive to entering the field and performing an appropriately 'expert', intelligible and acceptable researcher role and also align myself with the group of professionals in *Brook College*. The decision to cut my hair, for

example, could be considered a thinly veiled attempt at constructing an image of myself as a 'serious' individual, as a 'professional' and as a learned researcher ought to look, as opposed to the long-haired hippy Jason had met at the *Advancing Access* conference. Likewise, my pre-field preparations gathering information about *Brook College* so as *to appear* 'prepared', 'knowledgeable', 'professional' and as a 'serious expert' as I assumed a researcher should, were also pieces of those same identity performances. Though in as much as these tactics appeared to work in one respect with one group, they also created mirrored obstacles for other groups – most notably students.

A reflexive commentary of a situation that arose during Jason's tour, I think, underscores the importance of affiliation and association issues:

> As we walk and talk, Jason tells me there is another reason for his offer of a tour; he is 'on duty'. His job is to walk the college grounds to ensure students are not 'skiving' or idling between lessons, and importantly, patrol the student smoking shelter.
>
> We walk out onto the main carpark and continue to open courtyard. Ahead of us in the near distance is a black wooden-fenced area with 30-40 students standing nearby. As we approach it becomes clear this the student smoking shelter. We move closer and Jason tells me he often needs to patrol this area and chorale students to stand inside the fenced area for insurance reasons. Step by step we edge closer, and as we do I begin to feel a swell of reticence about my presence alongside Jason. I smoke myself, and when Jason mentioned a 'student smoking shelter', I immediately thought this might be a good place to engage in informal conversations with students where I could "move away from being exclusively considered a member of staff" and positively impact "how students might perceive me and my role" (FN1, pp. 15). However, quicker than I can react, Jason begins to stride towards the smoking shelter calling loudly for students to stand inside the wooden-fence. Immediately, I "realise that being with [Jason], by proxy, makes me complicit in his authoritarian move" (FN1, pp. 15). "I start to amble away, back towards where we came from, turning my back and putting my hands in my pockets to give the impression 'this is no concern of mine', separating me from being seen in the capacity of a teacher or authority figure" (FN1, pp. 15).

My (perceived) identity, roles and associations were being forged from the very first day, in all of my unavoidably performative utterances, actions and behaviours, and I would need to keep these issues more centrally in mind throughout fieldwork. After initial visits to secure access, I started thinking (more) critically and reflexively about the ways I could mitigate against perceptual imbalances of affiliation towards one group over another, becoming more mindful of my embodied performances and how these may have affected my perceived identity and role, and aspects of data collection. Latterly, I began to appreciate the importance of group allegiance/s, as well as the discursive-performative impact of 'place' and 'space' on my (perceived) identity, role/s and associations.

2.7.2. 'Space' & 'Place'

Poststructuralist, cultural geographers often seek to critically expand ideas of space and place beyond geographic location and instead focus on the ways in which spatiality is discursively constructed, constituted and practiced (Ward, 2003, IN: Cairns, 2013). For instance, Hart (2004, pp. 98) "refuses to take as given discrete objects, identities, places and events; instead [*attending*] to how they are produced and changed in practice in relation to one another" – drawing on more materialist analytic perspectives. Likewise, Kabachnik (2012, pp. 212-213) argues:

> "Place is a powerful influence in our lives, though by no means is it deterministic. Place matters so much in all of our daily practices because *place is the crucial context for those very actions* (Entrikin 1991, Curry 1999, 2002b) [...] Indeed, what we do is remarkably correlated with where we are – not in the sense of latitude and longitude, but whether we are in a classroom, our bedroom, at work or in a crowded elevator. *Our* [*perceived*] *identities shift according to the places we are in, exemplifying the role place plays in identity formation and performance.*" (*my emphasis*)

Additionally, Cairns (2013, pp. 329) reflects on her own experiences of conducting a school-based ethnography within a feminist-poststructural frame, stresses the importance of contextual 'place' in identity and role formation, stating:

"School ethnographers write about *the challenge of navigating this sociospatial authority structure while resisting the 'teacherly' identity that is most readily available* (Pomerantz, 2008; Renold, 2005). […] Standing at the front of the classroom with chalk in hand, I realised that my claims to a nonteacher identity had been undermined by this embodied performance of authority. *Establishing myself as something other than a teacher would require building relationships of trust over time, while actively resisting the privileged spatial practices afforded to me*." (*my emphasis*)

Perhaps we can see resonances in Cairns' (*ibid*) reflections with my own 'inadvertent' "performance of authority" alongside Jason at the student smoking shelter. Hart (2004), Kabachnik (2012) and Cairns (2013) alike all provoke us to broaden our understandings of space and place, and their constitutive performative effects in terms of identity constitution/performance and politics. From the outset of fieldwork, I was cognizant to try and 'resist the kinds of privileges' afforded to staff that Cairns notes. As data collection progressed, I was mindful to spend less time in spaces exclusively designated 'staff only'. Gradually, then, I started to move away from the 6th Form Programme Office as my base of operations to spend more time in 'neutral' college spaces or those designated primarily for students. In this way, I become more critically aware of my own embodied identity performances thinking especially about how I might begin performing myself *in different ways* to address 'distorted' role and identity perceptions, and imbalances of association towards staff.

Additionally, in school-based ethnographies it is commonly understood that our 'field' is already somewhat given – *a school, a classroom, a course, the enactment of a new policy initiative,* etc. – such that, methodologically speaking, it is often practiced as a relatively fixed, uniform and delimited entity. However, by thinking in this way we may fail to appreciate "*the field* and its [*performative*] constitution as a discursive and spatial practice" (Katz, 1994, pp. 67, *emphasis in original*). We may fail to appreciate the very performativities, the constructed-*ness*, of what we call our 'field' along with our complicity in these constructions; that is, our own constitutive performances that help to

enact the 'reality' that we take *as* our 'field'. By failing to think the dimensions of these

performativities, we may fail to appreciate the multitude of different spaces and places within our

field sites, their relative discursive jurisdictions in terms of who or what may be possible and

intelligible to do, say or be within those spaces/places, the identities they permit or deny, and the

effects these have for us and those within our 'field' sites that make up our inquiries. So too, then, it

is also an important site for researchers to reflexively examine and reflect on the practices,

processes and politics of our inquiries and how these may relate to who we (think we) 'are' or may

be (taken to be) in our work. Paraphrasing Gee (1999), Cohen (2010, pp. 475) states:

> "One is not free to perform any identity […] The identity possibilities accomplished
>
> through discourse are constrained by normative beliefs and practices, as well as
>
> material conditions, which functionally limit the range of possibilities for a given
>
> identity."

We can reasonably argue that certain "material", discursive and contextual conditions of the

different spaces and places within our field/s impact on the (perceived) identities (or

"identifications" (Stronach *et al.*, 2002, pp. 117), performances and subject positions available to us

as researchers. Space, place and context not only precede us, but also our strategic efforts at the

crafting of what we deem appropriate performances of our researcherly roles and identities; and,

the same is also necessarily true for our participants; for us all in fact. The specific discursive-

contextual conditions and jurisdictions, then, impact on the nature and possibilities regarding the

kinds of stories participants are able or willing to tell us. Holstein & Gubrium (1998, pp. 173-174)

argue: "Occasions [*and locations*] may own stories as much as people do" meaning "there are

circumstantial limits to the substantive bounds of the tellable". My experiences in the staff smoking

shelter brought many of these reflections into sharp focus.

I am a smoker, so during our initial tour, Jason also pointed out the staff smoking shelter. While we

walked, he made it clear I should not use, *or even enter*, the student smoking shelter as stipulated by

the college's staff conduct policies. If I wanted to smoke, he said, I had to use the *staff* smoking shelter. Day to day, then, I would go to the staff smoking shelter to escape the routine stresses of data collection and immersion in the field.

Quite by chance, though, I found myself being told rather different stories in rather different ways in the smoking shelter than I had been hearing 'inside' the formal college spaces. Conversations 'out here' felt more informal, professionally depressurised and elicited fantastically illuminative data I seldom was able to gather elsewhere. Staff seemed much more willing to talk (more) 'freely' and accept me as an outsider 'out here'. I believe my repeated presence in the smoking shelter also helped break down initial wariness towards me and foster associations particularly away from Jason as 'the boss'. While I wouldn't recommend it, it does seem smoking is a great ethnographic 'method'.

My curiosity peaked and I decided to visit the staff smoking shelter more for data collection. However, as I did, I started feeling guilty; I questioned the ethical dimensions of this methodological tactic.

The college had hundreds of staff, so, frequently in the smoking shelter individuals wouldn't immediately know who I was. All staff wore blue badges, but I wore a red 'volunteer' badge which clearly marked me out from the get-go. Initially, many staff seemed wary of me, the types of conversations I pursued and the fact I was always seemed to be scribbling what they said in my notebook.

I started to more explicitly identify myself as a researcher in the college and indicated I may make notes of conversations and that these *may be* used as data. And, of course, many were happy to informally consent in this way. However, when more formal recruitment was attempted many appeared to 'close-off' and refuse. By introducing this (artificial) formality, I felt the nature and content of these interactions in the smoking shelter started to fundamentally change. It seemed the

formal ethical procedures of recruitment were undermining the fruitful informality of the space/place and the developing relationships I was keen to foster (*see*, Thorne, 1980).

On one occasion, I spoke with a teacher and fellow smoker, Hannah, about my access negotiations with Jason. Hannah offered her thoughts on the college's management and organisational politics, particularly noting Jason's role – describing him as "*the smiling assassin*" (FN11, pp. 6). This was a warning for me to bear in mind during our access talks as, in her opinion, Jason would routinely say one thing to staff but do another due to his role in the hierarchy of senior management.

As I talked with Hannah, she abruptly stopped mid-sentence as another member staff entered the smoking shelter and sat nearby:

> "…[sharp pause]… Oh, no, wait, actually better not say that."

I sense the atmosphere change and Hannah quickly changes topic, so I don't press the conversation further. But, as we walked back through the college buildings towards the 6th Form Office, Hannah, vigilantly scanning for eavesdropping passers-by, whispers:

> "Sorry, I couldn't talk out there, you never know who will hear; who'll say something
> […] I had to bite my tongue out there […] but, I'll give you the low-down later."

Implied in Hannah's abrupt 'stop' and clarification is that some things *cannot* or *should not* be said to *some people,* perhaps especially an 'outsider', even in the informal space of the smoking shelter for fear of repercussion. It seemed there were certain 'informal' spaces and places around the college where some things were ok to say to some people, and other, more 'formal' spaces/places where some things could or should not be said. However, even in the more 'informal' space of the staff smoking shelter, staff still seemed vigilant of what they said to me and how, especially in front of other staff.

Perhaps through the long and immersive course of ethnographic fieldwork we may often let it slip out of mind that in such studies within hierarchical, professional organisations/institutions like schools and colleges, many of our participants are, first and foremost, *employees.* What people *can* say, where, to whom, in front of whom, and how, as such, is bound up with many ramifying professional power relations and organisational politics. For researchers, then, these are potential ethical issues. Hannah (like all staff) is discursively-politically embedded and positioned by the college's organisational politics and discourses of professionalism relative to what, where and to whom, one *can* speak. And, as she implies, there can be consequences for 'talking out of school'.

Importantly, this situation raised a series of ethical dilemmas and questions which, I think, are pertinent to many ethnographers/ethnographies speaking primarily to the institutional context-specificity of ethical-political issues, the ethical-political dimensions of data collection in different 'formal' and 'informal' spaces/places within our field sites and the ethical considerations necessitated by working with professionals in professional institutions and organisations.

Like Walford (2005, pp. 91), I propose to have "no full solution to these problems" and this is precisely my point; in fact, I think this is at heart the problem with many standard*ised* approaches to ethics/ethical practice that seem to favour overly simplistic answers to vexingly complex and in many ways, irresolvable, problems. Bauman (1993, pp. 16-17) argues:

> "…we live an act in the company of an apparently endless multitude of other human beings, seen or guessed, known and unknown, whose life and actions depend on what we do and in turn influence what we do, what we can do and what we ought to do – *all of this in ways we are neither able to understand nor are able to presage* […] *Between the deeds and their outcomes there is a huge distance…"* (*my emphasis*)

And if, as Cameron (2015, pp. 410) says, that "…following Bauman (2003), [*we agree that*] ethical relationships are characterised by an on-going interrogation of the kinds of responsibilities that we

might owe to others, and which cannot be reduced to a simple exercise in rule-following, [*then*] it becomes apparent that the application of many existing rules bears little relationship to ethical conduct whatsoever". Pring (2000b) argues that each unique inquiry situation generates its own unique ethical considerations requiring their own unique responses thus foregrounding the unpredictably emergent, situated and negotiated nature of (dealing with) ethical issues thereby undermining many of the institutionally 'standard(ised)' approaches to ethical research.

"The truth in question" Bauman (1993, pp. 32-33; 35) points out, "is that the messiness of [*the social world*] will stay whatever we do or know, that the little orders and 'systems' we carve out in the world are brittle […] effete, untrustworthy, and morally doubtful (even if instrumentally efficient) substitutes".

3.1. Data Collection

3.1.1. Pastoral Mentors & Pastoral Tutor Groups

As noted earlier, on my first trip to *Brook College,* Jason had planned for me to speak to the A-Level Pastoral Mentoring Team and arranged a timetable of Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons for me to sit in on. Though, it is perhaps worthwhile to briefly describe who they are and what role pastoral mentors occupy in the college to provide some context for discussions that follow.

All A-Level and Vocational Studies students, upon enrolment into *Brook College*, are assigned to a Pastoral Tutor Group and a Pastoral Mentor or Tutor (informally known as "PTs" among students and staff). For ease of understanding, this is something alike the traditional role of a Form Tutor but without formal subject-based teaching requirements. A-Level Pastoral Mentors can have anywhere from 150-200 (sometimes more) students in their respective Pastoral Tutor Groups across AS- and A2- cohorts and have weekly Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons with each of their Tutor Groups. Pastoral Tutor Groups, as far as possible, are populated with 'like' students – that is, students studying similar numbers and/or combinations of subjects, usually as a result of timetabling and class planning. While there is no explicit streaming or 'setting' policy in place at *Brook College* as far as Pastoral Tutor Groups are concerned, this method of populating Tutor Groups with 'like' students did mean that certain patterns emerged. For instance, there was a small group of students who were studying 5 full A-Levels – a relative rarity nationwide. Due to these students' dramatically increased class schedules (relative to most other students in the college) available timetabling slots for Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons were limited. As such, these '5 A-Level students' were all placed in the same Pastoral Tutor Group. Furthermore, because these students were enrolled on 5 *full* A-level programmes they were automatically considered 'high achievers'; the "superstars" [FN6 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 4] of *Brook College* as one mentor described them. As a result, many were assumed to be applying to what are routinely perceived as the *most* prestigious and demanding courses at the *most*

prestigious institutions, many requiring early UCAS applications – for example, applications to Oxford and Cambridge, Musical Conservatories, to Medicine, Veterinary and Dentistry courses. In the first days of data collection, one Mentor described their Pastoral Tutor Group as "stuffed full of Med, Vet and Oxbridge [*students*]" [FN1 – LJMU – BC/ME –pp. 11], and another described theirs as "mostly full of Med, Vet and Oxbridge students – some nursing and midwifery – one or two Art" [FN2.2 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 54]. Having said all this, *Brook College* students, on the whole, were/are extremely high achieving.

During the single-period, weekly Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons, Pastoral Mentors engaged in a wide range of activities following a standard, agreed upon curriculum. Each Pastoral Mentor, as I understand it, is charged with developing a scheme of work for certain 'core' topics and while they all follow a standard curriculum, each has "their [*pedagogical*] own style" [Andrea, FN2 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 18] in how they deliver that curriculum, as one mentor put it. Activities in these Tutor Group Lessons ranged from the seemingly banal communication of college announcements and upcoming events or opportunities, to delivering set curricular lessons on a variety of social, cultural, educational and political issues. Though, it should be well noted that the latter is significantly limited. This is because, following enrolment at the beginning of their AS-Level studies, Tutor Group Lessons soon become increasingly dedicated to introducing HE and supporting students' thinking about and applications to HE through UCAS, as well as other post-college progressions. As students matriculate through AS-Level into A2-Level study, the focus and content of Tutor Group Lessons almost exclusively becomes delivering general advice and guidance on HE information gathering and course/institution choice. As time passes, Tutor Group Lessons then becomes more specifically dedicated to the physical completion of key tasks required for UCAS applications, such as writing personal statements. Once UCAS applications are complete and sent, Tutor Group Lessons then begin to focus more so on supporting students' academic performance in upcoming A-Level examinations.

In addition to weekly timetabled Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons all students, once a term, have a standing appointment to meet with their Pastoral Mentors, primarily, to discuss their academic progress, but also any of a variety of pastoral and personal issues – informally known as a 'one-to-one'. One-to-one meetings between mentor and student normally take place at the desk of the mentor in the main 6th Form Programme Office; however, more 'sensitive' meetings may take place in enclosed offices surrounding the programme office. In the same sense as the evolving focus of Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons becomes increasingly HE-centric, likewise, as time moves on one-to-one meetings follow a similar pattern providing more specific, personalised advice and guidance.

Mentors also operate an 'open-door policy' whereby any student, at any time, can arrange to meet with their dedicated Pastoral Mentor by making an appointment. Likewise, Pastoral Mentors have the power to call their students for one-to-one meetings as and when they see fit. Students can also, on certain occasions, simply 'drop-in' to see their Pastoral Mentor for a chat or to drop off work from previous lessons or one-to-one meetings. In addition, Subject Tutors and other college staff and faculty also possess the power to 'refer' students to their Pastoral Mentors at their discretion – this can be for any number of reasons. Most often students are 'flagged' and referred to their Pastoral Mentors by Subject Tutors for falling short of agreed upon "MTGs" (*Minimum Target Grades*) and pre-set internal progression criteria, poor attendance, pastoral and/or behavioural issues – though this list is not exhaustive.

It is worth noting, at this point, that I did not collect any information or data relative to the background, identity and/or intersectionality of the pastoral mentors, students, staff and other participants of this study – nor explore such issues directly or explicitly in this work. It is not that I did/do not believe this to be a pertinent analytic consideration in educational research, of course it is; however, personally speaking, I felt deeply uncomfortable about examining these aspects of my participants and reflected on why this was.

Fox & Alldred (2018, pp. 5) point out that "[w]hile post-structuralism and social constructionism provided a means to break through top-down, determinist theories of power and social structure, the focus upon textuality, discourses and systems of thought in these approaches tended to create distance between theory and practice, and gave the sense that radical, interventionist critiques of inequities and oppressions *were merely further* [*problematic*] *constructions of the social world*." Likewise, Hodgson & Standish (2009, pp. 312-313, *my emphasis*) draw on the critical work of Baker & Heyning (2004) (citing McWhorter (1999)) regarding the use of Foucault in work on identity politics and in social justice projects in the social sciences, highlighting the potential problematics of using poststructuralist theory/thought in these domains, suggesting that:

> "The subject is assumed as given and is central to an analysis that is conducted *in terms of a priori categories* according to which injustice is understood. *Writing of this kind assumes these as fixed categories upon which any analysis of subjugation or resistance is to be based, with the result, it might be argued, that these categorizations become progressively entrenched*. […] The subject is asked to define itself in terms of these categories, and their arbitrary nature, and the power/knowledge relations through which they are constituted [*often*] remain unquestioned. […] In the kind of analysis that is current in much contemporary educational research, the subject is made central, to be sure, *but it is understood in terms of its identity vis-à-vis socially- and culturally-constructed categories*."

Aside the fact that I did not plan or design this study with an explicit analytic interest in identity politics or intersectionality, nor had social justice objectives and emancipatory ideals squarely in mind, I felt that to collect data regarding who my participants 'were'/'are', in these respects – that is, in terms of "a priori […] fixed […] socially- and culturally-constructed categories" – would be deeply problematic. Even if I were to do this simply to provide added context or interpretive sense for my analytic-interpretive discussions, I felt that I would not actually be addressing the constitution of subjectivity nor "the power/knowledge relations through which […] [*these categories*] are constituted" and rather, by not examining them in detail, would simple even more deeply 'entrench' problematic definitional labels and identity categories by which people are already differentially

inscribed and therefore, marginalised. Parks, Gore & Amosa (2010, pp. 6) argue: "Poststructuralism's concern with essentialist discourses makes us sceptical of any account that promises universal liberation for a specific social, ethnic, racial, linguistic or gendered group, without recognising the injustices done to particular parties as a result of categorising and naming them in particular ways." In this sense, as Richardson & St. Pierre (2005, pp. 968) note citing Spivak's (1974, pp. xv) concern: we are always somewhat obliged to work with the "resources of […] the language we already possess and which possess us", and further, must recognise performative language-in-use is an active force in the production of the world.

Hodgson & Standish (*ibid*, pp. 324-325, *my emphasis*) advocate a "rhizomatic approach" to poststructuralist-educational research on identity politics and/or for social justice, and note that:

> "Identity politics underpinned by a neo-Marxist understanding of power, which we
> have drawn attention to in relation to […] work on social justice, works towards a
> completeness of the individual, towards a recognition and representation of identity
> categories that renders their members fully and equally present, and thereby fully
> accountable and accounted for. *A rhizomatic approach to research begins from the*
> *very questioning of the desire for and possibility of wholeness*. […] [*This is*] a further
> poststructuralist way in which we might follow Foucault's call to resist being
> governed in this way and at this cost. *It resists those categories of identity around*
> *which discussions of social justice ossify and instead questions the truth on which*
> *they are based*; thereby it avoids […] inclusion on someone else's terms."

As noted earlier, in *'…openings…'*, postmodern and poststructuralist thought-thinking challenge traditional and conventional notions of the 'self' and identity, and further, more generally, seeks to trouble the wisdom and certainty of traditionally, uncritically received social structures, categories and definitions, such as those central to discussions of identity politics, intersectionality and social justice.

Poststructuralist views of 'self' and identity are not to be based on received *a priori* explanatory social categories, but instead, ought focus on a decentred, historical-cultural, discursive, performative constitution of subjectivity that continually shifts and changes in action, in relation to context and specific discursive practices. In this, poststructuralists emphasise subjectivity/subject formation as fragmentary, often contradictory, and influenced by complexly intertwined social-relational, historical, biographical performative forces constituting one's *sense* of 'self' and identity at any given moment. Subjects, therefore, are constantly engaged in a struggle for the (temporary) determination of their subjectivities and identities amid competing discourses, social practices and networks of power that continuously transform one's *experience* and *sense of* 'self' and identity – thus undermining the idea of stable, *a priori* social identity categories by which (in)justice is understood.

But, in this sense, we can appreciate the legacy of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School in contemporary poststructuralist thought that characterised, for example, the work of Marcuse, Habermas and Adorno. These 'philosophical sociologists' of the Frankfurt School focused on a disruption of disciplinary authority by rejecting positivism and challenging fixed hierarchical structures of social domination and subjection – yet, importantly, many still clung to somewhat modernist commitments such as the rational subject and the possibility of 'truth' that postmodern and poststructural positions specifically rejected.

Some claim that critical theory has now "largely mutated into post-structuralism" (Boler, 2000, p. 362). And, while this position is of considerable debate it may be possible to trace the links between the 'emancipatory' impulses of Critical Theory with contemporary poststructuralis*m*s, such feminism/feminist theory, critical race theory, disability studies, social justice studies for instance. Lincoln & Denzin (2003, pp. 625-626) argue that:

"…the critique and concern of the critical theorists has been an effort to design a pedagogy of resistance within communities of difference. The pedagogy of resistance, of taking back 'voice', of reclaiming narrative for one's own rather than adapting to the narratives of a dominant majority […] [*works at*] overturning oppression and achieving social justice through empowerment of the marginalized, the poor, the nameless, the voiceless."

Contemporary manifestations of emancipatory critical theoretical trends in poststructural work, then, draw on and deploy discourses of social justice, (in)equality and inclusion. Though, in critical theory as I understand it, power tends to be understood as top-down and ostensibly oppressive in nature thereby mobilizing the binary of oppressor/oppressed compatible with such liberatory agendas. As such, critical theorists tend to view the crucial outcome of their work as 'real' social change based on subjects who possess (or are 'given') the consciousness, 'voice' and agency to change it. Though positions on the possibility of achieving the central objectives of social justice agendas and projects are less common among postmodern work. In poststructuralist work, this possibility is even more modest, if accepted at all, as alluded by Fox & Alldred (2018) above. Cole (2003) also mounts a challenge to the possibility of social justice and 'real' social change from with a Marxist socio-theoretical perspective.

In part, this position arises because postmodernism and poststructuralism leave us with no basis upon which to privilege one set of values, morals, ethics, frames or positions over an/y/other. The postmodern-poststructural destabilisation of foundationalism accompanied by a scepticism towards essential 'truths' and the breakdown modernity's emancipatory "grand narrative[s]" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 15), stresses polyvocality, multiple 'truth*s*' and local politics as opposed to totalizing theoretical frameworks and/or large scale political products, such as social justice objectives embedded in social scientific research. Poststructural critiques, in particular, have drawn attention to how positions on plurality, relativity, and anti-foundationalism have rendered it impossible to unproblematically recognise *and address* forms of inequality and oppression through recourse to 'absolutes' associated

with injustice. As everything is plural, and relativistic, no one position can gain validity or ascendancy over another making it difficult to address social injustice by recourse to a foundational, universal or essential moral/ethical position.

It is also, in part, because from a poststructuralist perspective we are required to problematise the very terms and discourses by which something is constructed as a universal, foundational or essential 'truth' or desire, such as the project and terms constituting discourses of social justice itself. For instance, we should question the concepts of agency and empowerment central to these discourses. On a poststructuralist understanding, agency does not assume freedom *from* discursive constitution and subject regulation. Rather, agency may only reside in the capacity for peoples to recognize their discursive constitution as unavoidably historical, culturally and socially regulated through particular discourses that, then, can be questioned and changed but from which we cannot escape. Foucault's critique of and resistance to the concept of 'gay' identity as a historical construct may be one such example.

Another issue worthy of note here, relative to empowerment, is brought into focus in Lincoln & Denzin's comments above – that is, the suggestion that critical theoretical (and poststructural) social justice work provides the possibility of 'taking back voice' and 'reclaiming narratives' for the 'empowerment of the marginalized'. Again, these ideas, positions and terms require problematisation regarding how 'voice', empowerment and understandings of power more generally are constructed and performed. Lather (2011, pp. 483) also argues: "[g]iven the dangers of research to the researched, ethnographic traditions of romantic aspirations about giving voice to the voiceless are much troubled in the face of the manipulation, violation and betrayal inherent in ethnographic representation…". So, in our own research work, we should ask: who has the power or right to 'reclaim' and 'give' voice? Who or what do we 'reclaim' 'voice' from? From a Foucauldian perspective, is this how we ought conceptualise power; as an entity? Likewise, is 'voice' a *thing;*

something we can 'give' and 'take'? Does 'voice' amount to a singular narrative tying everyone into a unified group or field of experience, who all understand injustice and pursue the same emancipatory ideals in the same ways? Who (or what) is empowered in these moves?

Pushing these critical, problematising questions even further, as a result of a poststructuralist scepticism towards universalism, foundationalism, essentialism and totalizing discourses, we are spurred to question (and reject if needed) any discourse that positions social justice as a universal 'good' without an explicit recognition of the specific, local and different(iating) ways in which that project is constructed, understood and performed. This leads us, then, to ask still more expansive questions: What discourses are invoked to legitimise discourses of social justice? Who defines what constitutes 'justice'; and, 'justice' for whom? On what assumptions do we claim the 'high ground' by advocating a/our specific concept of justice? What is gained and lost in these definitions? What is necessarily elided, neglected, or silenced? What other dominations might occur? Is the object of 'social justice' uniformly understood and desired by each and all?

Of course, these are not simple questions – and certainly not ones, as I see it, that can be appropriately addressed by 'bolting on' discussions of identity politics and intersectionality in studies not specifically designed to examine such issues with meaningful critical analytic depth such as my own, here.

Throughout my analyses there are undoubtedly (and unavoidably) gendered, raced, classed, etc. dimensions to the discourses, structures, social practices and performances I identify and interpret within *Brook College* that speak to wider issues in education (and society) and I do my best to highlight these where merited. However, this is not a primary analytic object in this study; I only highlight such issues as I feel are analytically merited to include given the evolving interpretive 'stories' I sought to tell. I do not ignore these issues but rather, given my postmodern-poststructural

orientations, have tried to recognise the 'limits' of possibility relative to what I (have the power to) say and do, in these respects, without being complicit in a neoliberal individualisation that enacts a "perpetuation of the status quo" (Wendt & Seymour, 2010, pp. 671). Like Foucault:

> "My point is not that everything is bad, *but that everything is dangerous*, which is not the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So, my position leads not to apathy but to a […] pessimistic activism…" (IN: Sharpe, 2005, p. 103, *my emphasis*)

The position I take, then, is analytically cautious, sceptical, "pessimistic" and negative; it is, in this sense, a "politics of refusal" (Garland, 2013, pp. 376). It is a position that does not seek to contribute to a subjectification complementing the "state of things-as-they-are" (*ibid*), to a universalisation of discourses of social justice based on receive social categories, to an unproblematic romanticism of discourses of empowerment, to the "fiction of restoring lost voices" (Lather, 2011, pp. 483) or giving voice to the voiceless given the "weight of research as surveillance and normalisation" (*ibid*) that leaves us in the illusory position of "some non-complicitous place of knowing" (*ibid*).

3.1.2. Beginning fieldwork

In the opening days and weeks, I spent most of my time in the 6th Form Programme Office primarily following the work of the pastoral mentors. At this early stage, the only person I felt I 'knew' was Jason. I would arrive in college for 1st lessons (8:30-9:00am) and head to his office to 'check in' and this was mainly because, initially, I did not have a 'base of operations' and needed somewhere to leave my things while I worked. Though, sticking close by Jason was also a legal necessity until my enhanced DBS checks had been verified, and I was allocated my own college identification badge. And, as it would turn out, my identification badge would bring to the fore a number of ethical problematics related, again, to (perceptions of) my identity, role/s and associations.

More than ever before, child protection and safeguarding are, rightly so, high priorities in public institutions working with vulnerable groups such as children and *Brook College* is no exception. To even enter the college, *everyone* is required to wear college identification badges containing their photo, name, unique staff/student number and a scannable barcode alongside a group-identifier: 'STUDENT', 'STAFF', 'VOLUNTEER' or 'VISITOR'. You need an identification badge for even the most basic activities around *Brook College* – such as purchasing food and moving around the college spaces.

All students receive a grey lanyard with white lettering saying 'STUDENT' upon enrolment. Non-students, on the other hand, are designated to one of two groups: Volunteer and Staff. Red volunteer badges and lanyards are designated to those who, formally or informally, volunteer in the college a regular basis, but are not considered members of staff. Full-time teaching and support staff however wear blue lanyards with 'STAFF' repeated. Thus, on appearances alone, everyone knows who everyone is, what their role is and to which group they 'belong' – *student, volunteer* or *staff*.

On only my third visit to *Brook College*, Jason told me my own identification badge was ready for collection where I find I have been designated 'VOLUNTEER' (FN3.1, pp. 11); however, my lanyard was staff blue which immediately made me feel uneasy. I told Jason and the college's Human Resources staff I didn't wish to be identified as staff *in any way* and requested if I might change to a red volunteer lanyard instead.

Eventually, after consulting with Human Resources, Jason told me that since I would be working in the college for an extended period, would undergo staff induction training and would be held to the same sets of professional policies as staff, ostensibly, I would be considered *staff*. I voiced concerns over my perceived researcher identity and role/s to Jason and Human Resources and, despite their

hesitancy, I was eventually permitted to wear the red volunteer's lanyard. Though, again, this was only the beginning of issues regarding roles, associations, identifications and badges.

Some weeks later, on A-Level results day, I arrived at the college expecting to see swathes of elated students and parents, only to be told by one of the college's main reception administrative assistants I would be disappointed. Given results, today, are available online she said, students have no need to come to college. She told me the students in college that day would be those who *had not* achieved their desired/expected results and required guidance. Due to the sensitive context of results day, then, I felt nervous about how my approaches might be received by students and parents. I decided to escape the tense atmosphere of the Programme Office to the staff smoking shelter to deliberate on how best to approach people with sensitivity.

In the smoking shelter, I talked with Ruben about my dilemma. Together we discussed how I might best approach people where Ruben suggested I would feel more confident and have "more success" (FN6, pp. 17-18) if I changed my red 'volunteer' lanyard to staff blue. He said he felt this would also make fieldwork easier in general. He reasoned students and parents lent more authority to those visibly identifiable as staff and this would make them more likely to engage in conversations. Although, I immediately told Ruben I couldn't do this; I could not claim to be a something I'm not to facilitate data collection. This would be deception and deeply unethical; it is also simply untrue. Though Ruben says, *for me,* this "wouldn't be a problem" (FN6, pp. 17) because I'm "basically a member of staff anyway" (*ibid*). However, I couldn't change the colour of my badge and just had to make the best of the situation I found myself. I did manage to speak to *some* students and their parents on Results Day. However, most of these encounters were brief, surface level encounters due to students and parents being called away for scheduled meetings with pastoral mentors and tutors.

I realised though, despite my concerted efforts *not to be* identified as staff, that perceptions of my role and identity were relativistic and not solely within my power to control. As noted earlier:

"identities are a negotiated matter" (Thorne, 1980, pp. 287) and we are not the only ones involved in the performative constitution of our identities.

Despite wearing a red volunteer's lanyard throughout field work and consistently reinforcing my 'researcher' role/identity, Ruben, other staff, students and parents routinely took me as staff. And, when I thought about it more, this was entirely understandable: Ruben and I talked for the first time in the *staff* smoking shelter, after he saw me in *staff-only areas* like the programme office, using *staff* toilets and kitchen facilities, and had undertaken new *staff* induction training. In my reflexive notes, I noted: "because I have been spending most of my time working from the 6th form office, talking to staff and faculty more so than students in these early stages of data collection people are taking me as staff." (FN6, pp. 17-18). That is, I realised, up to this point, the extent of just how much *I had been* taking for granted in my routinised, repetitive behaviours and actions of professional identity, authority and privilege around the college, that I now appreciated were contributing to perceptions of me, effectively, *as a member of staff*. I had spent so much time in the 6th Form Programme Office with pastoral mentors and other staff, working primarily in *their* spaces and on *their* terms, accepting some of the minor privileges afforded to them, that this concentrated into a series of embodied performances of authority and 'staff-ness'. In this way, I was most centrally complicit in cultivating almost indelible perceptions of me as staff that impacted data collection with students and would continue to prove difficult to redress as fieldwork progressed.

In the same way, I also had significant trouble finding parents to talk to during fieldwork and opportunities seemed scant around college. Every year, though, the college hosted a "Prestigious Universities Parents' Evening" for those seeking to apply to the 'most prestigious' institutions and/or courses. I attended the event feeling hopeful my poor luck might change. Beginning the talk, Christine (Pastoral Mentor/ AS-Level Head of Studies) introduced 'important' college staff present:

"Right, good evening everybody, and welcome to our prestigious universities talk this evening, thank you very much for coming along… […] My name is Christine, I'm one of the A-Level Heads of Study and we have Jason over here […] another A-Level Head of Study, and we have Mrs. Morgan, our Deputy Principal, who you may have already met before at the Welcome Evening [**N.B.** *another Parents' event earlier in the year*], and we also have Diana who is going to speak to you about Medicine applications, we also have Mary from Student Services, and we have *Michael* with us as well… so there's a few people you can ask questions to at the end of the session as well." (FN28, pp. 38)

Including me in the list of prominent staff parents *should be aware of*, Christine implicates me as a member of that group. In fact, to reinforce this, after the talk many parents approached me to ask questions relating to their child's HE progressions as if I were staff. Of course, I quickly told them I was not staff and explained who I was. However, I realised the dye had been cast.

I have continued to think about how performances and perceptions of roles, associations and identities impacted on data collection. I quickly realised that this is not something I have ultimate control over. Simply, I believe, all we can do is maintain a critical and reflexive awareness of *ourselves* and the conduct of our inquiries, focusing on the performative dynamics of the constitution of our researcher-selves and how our embodied conduct in the field affects this. We could possibly achieve this by simply engaging our participants in conversations about who they think we are and what they think we're doing. These issues unavoidably impact on the very nature of the data we (can) collect and thus, deserve our explicit reflexive attention.

While transcribing notes from the above event, I explored just how impossible the performative balancing acts of roles, associations and identifications seemed to be and how it continued to affect data collection far into fieldwork. Later in reflexive commentaries I noted that being marked out by Christine (and previously, Ruben, along with countless other staff members) as 'staff' was "not necessarily be a bad thing as this alignment comes from the staff themselves – a good sign relative to this group" and possibly helped "align me with staff in the eyes of parents, and may mean they

will be more inclined to talk to me or more inclined to talk when I approach them, even if I have to correct them." Though, as noted, I understood that the modest benefits of achieved with one group likely meant a reciprocal drawback with another group. I noted how this perceived role as 'staff' would very likely negatively impact relations with students: "I'll be more likely thought of as 'one of them' [i.e. staff] as opposed to 'one of us' [i.e. students]." (FN28, pp. 38)

I continued to 'check in' with Jason during the first days of data collection until I felt more confident to go about my activities more autonomously. Though, it is worth noting, 'checking in' with Jason before receiving my identification badge proved useful in other ways.

When I arrived at the college in the morning I would go to Jason's office, where we would exchange morning pleasantries before going about our respective days. These encounters usually lasted no more than 10minutes but proved massively helpful in clarifying things I had been observing and alerting me to upcoming events and activities. Then again, at the end of the day, I would again go back to Jason's office to collect my things where similar conversations would occur. I began to see these interactions as short, informal 'member checking' interviews with an official 'insider'. Though, while this habit proved highly useful, I understood it could not continue – for a number of reasons. Firstly, I simply couldn't ask, or expect, Jason to 'oversee' me and my work to this extent as a matter of his day to day duties in the college as a member of senior leadership. Secondly, I also later reflected that my association with Jason (as the 'boss' of the pastoral mentor team) in these opening weeks was probably the most significant contributor to imbalanced group affiliations, distorted role and identity perceptions, particularly with pastoral mentors.

Therefore, I decided it was worthwhile to try to find other 'insider' informants who might be able to provide information about the college, its practices, conventions and important upcoming events. This led me to Alice – one of the 6th Form Programme Office's Administrative Assistants, and fellow

smoker. The progress of fieldwork owes a priceless debt to Alice; the information and help she

offered, as well as her unconditional kindness.

3.2. Participant Observations

3.2.1. …with Pastoral Mentors

Beginning participant observations, I started by sitting with pastoral mentors shadowing their day-to-day work and asking basic questions about *Brook College* to get a sense of the institution and how they supported students' completion of their A-Level studies and assisted progressions into HE. I also offered to help mentors as they went about their work, photocopying or making tea, positioning myself as deferent and helpful, in an attempt to endear myself to these people fostering engagement, trust and reciprocity. And, I participated in light-hearted office chit-chat feeling this also facilitated positive relationship building.

However, during one-to-one meetings with students, mentors would ask me to leave due to potentially personal and/or sensitive information being discussed (FN7) – which I obliged initially without question. Later, talking with Jason, he reasserted I should not request to observe these meetings due to child protection & safeguarding, privacy and data protection. Jason requested I leave this to the discretion of mentors and students, but as a matter of principle, I shouldn't request to observe these 'personal' encounters.

I got the sense mentors asked me to leave because of these feelings of uncertainty about me, more than protecting students' privacy. As evidence of this, one mentor, some months into fieldwork noted how she initially thought I was an "undercover reporter" writing an "exposé" which made her very wary of me (FN14, pp. 4-5). Taken aback by these revelations and temporarily struck dumb, another mentor added, "Yeah, I wondered *what you were* when I started too" (*my emphasis*).

On reflection, I think I better understand, now, how this perception may have emerged and solidified in the mind of some mentors. Gans (1968, pp. 314) suggests that fieldworkers may often be taken to be 'spies', in a certain sense, and that fieldwork is "still", relatively speaking, "psychologically a form of espionage" (*see*, Thorne, 1980). As the mentor in question tells me after,

because of this perception, she was immediately rather wary of me and what I was up to in the college; perhaps seeing me as objectively detached, impersonal, insensitive, uncaring or, worse, an "exploitative interloper" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 69) seeking to 'uncover' things as an exposé journalist might. At one point later in fieldwork, she admitted she had even asked Jason: "have you checked his credentials?" (FN14 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 4-5).

Noteworthy also, here, is the second mentor's expression: "what you were", not '*who* you are'. In the early stages of data collection, I was frequently asked "who are you?" (see [FN2.1 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 36-37], [FN2.1 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 41-42], [FN4 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 30], [FN5 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 43]) and had become quite adept at dealing with this question, recognising early on that it was a central site for important identity performances of myself and the research. Though, I had not imagined this question would continue to recur this far into fieldwork and from members of the Pastoral Mentor team with whom I had spent a great deal of time already. However, Hayley and Laura did not question 'who' I was, but "what" I was.

Reflecting on this further, I think Jason's position as gatekeeper and interlocutor positioned him as the most prominent "reality definer" (Troman, 1996, pp. 71) of myself and this project during his informing of staff prior to my formal entry into the field. It seems that whatever information Jason communicated to his staff about me and my project prior to my arrival stuck, and further, that many of my actions and behaviours in the field may have inadvertently compounded some of those constructions. For instance, in the opening days, I simply didn't really know the college very well; I didn't know the people and felt nervous striking up conversations, so I would often sit off to the side of the programme office scribbling in my notebook until I worked up the confidence to approach people directly. Of course, this dissipated quite quickly with continued fieldwork. However, at the outset, this may have come off as the kind of detachment and 'objectivity' one would might expect of a fly-on-the-wall documentarian making Hayley's perception not 'distorted' but entirely understandable give my embodied performances.

Later, I considered that the presence of so many uncertainties – about myself, the project, its methods, focus and purpose – during access conversations with Jason may have contributed to inaccurate/distorted role perceptions forming among mentors. This, I feel, underscores the representational limits of communication in gatekeeper mediated access and consent negotiations and informing processes. It occurred to me that perhaps whatever information Jason communicated to his Pastoral Mentor team based on the ultimately uncertain and partial information I communicated to him provided the 'gap' that allowed these perceptions to form and proliferate. In this way, perhaps a 'rumour mill' began among staff where perceptions and interpretations of me and the project circulated like 'Chinese Whispers'. It seems highly unlikely Jason would have referred to me as an "undercover reporter", or what I was doing as writing an "exposé", or anything similar. Much more likely this identity perception emerged from a sense of nervousness, worry or anxiety as a result of the many uncertainties surrounding myself, the project, its methods and objectives.

As fieldwork progressed, though, I managed to get *either* students or mentors to permit me to observe one-to-one meetings, but rarely both together. On the occasions I did arrange observations of one-to-one meetings, they failed to materialise for many reasons. I continued *to try* to observe these encounters but continuously came upon, what I felt were, institutional obstacles. When asked to leave, I sat and observed the daily machinations of the programme office, talked with 'free' staff as well as listen in on (i.e. *eavesdrop*) one-to-ones from afar. Later, I reflected on the place of 'eavesdropping' in ethnographic inquiry and its ethical dimensions; another 'method' and field practice I suspect is highly common but dubiously absent in our ethical submissions and methodological accounts of field practices.

I thought it was best to spend the first few days simply getting acquainted with how things work at *Brook College*, getting to know the mentors and other staff, identifying 'key' staff, locating different departments, understanding the college's organisational structure and professional hierarchy, and

getting to grips with the routine goings on of the college to develop a sense of the organisational/institutional context and culture in order to facilitate more grounded observations and interpretations.

Because pastoral mentors are not (strictly) teachers, they don't have their own classrooms, so Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons would take place in many different locations around the college. Due to the sheer size and labyrinthine complexity of the campus and its buildings, this posed a problem in the first weeks. Prior to scheduled observations, mentors told me where they were having classes. However, being able to successfully navigate to these rooms without getting lost was very difficult. I decided, instead, to arrange with mentors to meet in the Programme Office prior to scheduled observations so we could walk to lessons together.

This also proved productive in terms of enhancing other aspects of data collection in upcoming lessons and contributed to relationship/rapport building with mentors. Meeting a few minutes prior and walking to lessons together, mentors and I could chat more informally away from the professional strictures of the Programme Office. On these short walks I gathered valuable information about the work of mentors, their professional habits, opinions and beliefs, how the college operated on a day-to-day basis and upcoming events of interest. Likewise, mentors talked about the purpose/s and focus of that day's lesson and where it fitted into larger curricular plans. As time progressed, I believe this, in part, helped dispel much of the initial wariness and uncertainty about myself and the study, and helped me become a more "active member" (Adler & Adler, 1998) of the college community – though, perhaps as I have already highlighted, not always with the desired effects.

3.2.2. …in Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons

Initially at least, participant observations primarily took place in the 6th Form Programme Office and in Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons. Participant observations, then, progressively expanded to include

other spaces and events, such as, college-run 'marketplace' style events such as the annual HE and Careers & Employability Fairs and HE-focused talks and workshops.

I spent most of the day around the 6th Form Programme Office working alongside pastoral mentors, speaking with students and attending timetabled Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons. Pastoral Mentors would set up their lessons while students waited in the corridor to be called in. As noted, even at this early stage, I was already cognizant of my perceived identity, and particularly associations with staff, and how this might affect relations with students. As such, when I arrived at a classroom with a mentor, I decided to wait outside with students in an effort to signal I did not have 'privileged' (Cairns, 2013) status. Waiting outside to go in, in this way, also allowed me to informally mingle with students before we entered lessons.

In lessons, then, I would sit with the students I had just spoken to in the corridors or approach other groups of students by introducing myself, stating my reasons for being there and asking if it was ok if I asked a few questions as lessons progressed. Due to the length of Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons (45mins +/-), these interactions often amounted to short, informal interviews and focus groups with groups of students.

Mentors, at least in the first few lessons, introduced me in a very general fashion as a 'PhD Student studying Higher Education'. I specifically requested mentors identify me as a 'student', or 'student researcher' in order to try to construct myself in less authoritative, less alienating ways given early field reflections of my perceived identity and role. Though, as I continued to attend the same lessons week on week, these introductions became less formal and necessary. After a while I was just 'Michael (again)'.

During lessons, I sat with students, discussed the content of the session and completed the same activities set for them. As we worked, I asked students questions individually while also attempting to instigate group conversations about what they were being told, what we were doing, what they understood from these and how they related to their thinking, and experiences, applying to HE. I

was keen to compile detailed and deeply descriptive field notes focusing, particularly, on students' talk about their experiences applying to university and the college's practices supporting them.

From the start of data collection, I felt a strong desire to remain as open as possible to hearing and seeing what individuals actually *said* and *did* rather than bring too many of my own pre-existing ideas into the field. Though, obviously, this kind of 'bracketing-off' of subjectivity and our interpretive baggage is not possible. Immediately at least, I tried to work as if everything *could be* relevant remembering Strathern's (2002, pp. 309) comments that data in ethnographic research may "become a resource only from some vantage point in the future" supporting my initially broad and inclusive approach. In the beginning and indeed throughout, I seldom felt entirely sure exactly what I was researching, where I was headed or what I might 'make' with the data I was collecting, so this broad, inclusive approach helped garner a wealth of data with many possible interpretive avenues to pursue, as well as quell some anxieties about directionality.

As participant observations and initial analyses progressed iteratively and began to coalesce into emergent interpretive ideas and themes to pursue further, the foci of data collection activities were subsequently shaped. After only a short period of time, I had developed a wide range of interpretive ideas and themes which continued data collection activities were attuned to enrich.

3.3. Practices of Participant Observation Data Collection: *Note-making/taking*

Prior to my doctorate, from Masters' study, I already had experience of naturalistic-ethnographic styles of participant observational data collection. While the practices are largely transferrable, at Masters level, I was utilising these practices and methods in small-scale projects worlds apart from the depth and complexity demanded in doctoral work. As such, before beginning participant observations, I decided to spend some time thinking about note-making/taking data collection practices in the field.

Personally, I prefer pen and paper. I feel most comfortable compiling data in the 'old fashioned' Anthropological fashion despite the obvious labour-saving benefits of electronic devices. I feel a greater sense of control, immediacy and plasticity hand-writing notes. Working with pen and paper, I felt I could write in the most unrestricted ways; I could move back and forth to re-read notes in real time as I made more notes. Additionally, my data would naturally be in one place and chronologically sequenced, making it easier to navigate masses of unstructured data. Handwriting also made it possible to add new notes atop old notes in light of newly collected data in a palimpsestic manner. This 'layering', then, later assisted me in drawing interpretive connections between (seemingly) disparate pieces of data and getting a sense of the evolving changes in my interpretive thinking. Furthermore, I could overlay notes and interpretations with references to relevant literature I had read and begin developing deeper analytic ideas *while collecting data*. The most crucial benefit, however, was the ability to thread reflexive commentaries through the substantive data about the processes I was engaging in; becoming another meta-'layer' of data about the data and the inquiry itself.

On reflection, in as much as I feel this was/is the best way to work *for me*, it is not without its drawbacks. Practically speaking, beyond content, the very form of our fieldnotes impact the kinds of interpretations and analyses we (*can*) pursue. Additionally, naturalistic participant observation often elicits very large volumes of very diverse f*orms* of data. While I felt it important not to artificially

disaggregate data, it felt like a practical analytical, labour-saving necessity to, in part, structure and organise participant observational data during collection. Prior to fieldwork, it seemed prudent to think about how I could, in part, systematise my note-making/taking practices to reduce transcription labour and ensure data was already in (somewhat of) an appropriate form for analysis. A certain degree of systematicity in ethnographic note-making/taking, then, is perhaps not only practically helpful but also somewhat necessary given our large and unstructured data sets.

I got into the habit of tentatively structuring my data as I collected it. By systematising and partially structuring my data 'on the hoof', I felt I could reduce mechanical organising work and make the task of transcribing and analysis much more efficient as the raw materials would already be in (roughly) the 'correct' form. In fact, I reflected that the level of disciplined systematisation of my note-making/taking practices added a complementary level of internal consistency making transcripts easier to read concurrently due to their patterning. Additionally, I felt this helped make broader patterns and 'themes' across the data easier to comprehend.

I also developed a set of short-hand notations (*grammatical devices, shapes, symbols, etc.)* to help structure and organise data and to reduce time spent note-making/taking at the expense of actually interacting and particpating. For instance, all interpretive memos were noted with a triple-asterisk inside squared-brackets (e.g. "[***…]"); reflexive memos were noted with the title "MEMO:" inside squared brackets (e.g. "[MEMO:…]"). I also used certain shapes and symbols (such as: †, Ø, Δ, Ω, →) to label certain pieces of data which might relate to each other in some way, making it easier to draw interpretive interconnections while transcribing and analysing data.

And, indeed, I approached other data collection practices with similar systematic discipline as I felt they led to good working habits in the field. For example, a researcher's field notebook is probably one of the most important things in their lives; therefore, I made a habit of carrying my notebook *everywhere* so I was in a state of perpetual readiness should a data collection opportunity present when I least expected. And, in part, this strategy also helped ensure the security of my data. It got to

the point where it was almost inconceivable for people around the college to see or even think of

me without my notebook – and this even led to some ethical-political issues early on in fieldwork I

referred to as "Pen & Notebook Issues" (FN1; FN2.2; FN3.1, FN3.2; FN4.2; FN7.2; FN14).

3.4. Supplementing Participant Observations

3.4.1. Documentary & Artefact Collection and Photography

To enrich the data collected through participant observations, I also collected an array of 'found' field documents and artefacts. Drawing on a pragmatic perspective, Charlotte Aul- Davies (1999) argues for a fuller notion and practice of participant observation as more than merely observing *and*/*or* participating in differing quantities arguing that the practice "consists of a cluster of techniques" where "the researcher chooses those that are most fruitful in the given situation" (*ibid*, pp. 71). Following this kind of reflexively guided style of methodological thinking, I maintained a focus on gathering relevant documents and field artefacts, as well as generating my own photographs.

During methodological planning, I decided to take photographs to introduce additional 'layers' to the data. I was also academically interested in the use of the visual – *images, photography, artwork, etc.* – in qualitative-interpretive inquiry long before my doctorate and considered this a valuable ethnographic method for many reasons.

As others have argued, the (post-)modern world is as much visual as textual; yet majority of academic work focuses almost exclusively on text. Gillian Rose (2012, pp. 349) in *Visual Methodologies*, attempts to develop a critical visual methodology foregrounding the mutual sociality and discursive intertextuality of both text and image *together* advocating "mixing methods" to include the visual in the textual, and textual in the visual. Rose (*ibid*), following the likes of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, highlights the essential multi-modality and intertextuality of any discursive constitution and, in this sense, how we should not so uncritically succumb to unequivocally circumscribed definitions and uses of 'image' and 'text' in our work. Images may be discourse-analytically '*read*' as texts, as much as texts can be analysed for their non-textual discursive components. In short, we should take a more multi-dimensional perspective to ethnographic data considering text *as* image, and image *as* text, interchangeably.

And, as I have found, generating photographs in the field also has an entirely unpredicted impact on remembering and thus, on interpretation. Found documents, field artefacts and researcher-generated photographs, in the same ways as peoples' words, all provoke. Visual materials and physical artefacts can provoke us to remember previously forgotten, mis- or partially remembered events, interactions and ideas. Though, much more importantly than facilitating recall, visual materials and artefacts can provoke incipiently new interpretations to emerge through our corporeal and interpretive engagement with them as analytic objects – something like Proust's (1913) first bite of a tea-soaked madeleine that provoked *Remembrance of Things Past*. Small details, subtleties, fine nuances, textures, feelings, emotions and impressions perhaps not readily comprehendible or possible at the time, would come into sharp focus by simply looking at a photo and remembering where, when and why I had taken it or trying to think where I might 'place' it in my analytic work. When transcribing field notes, I inserted relevant images into transcripts and added interpretive captions to many. Often this simple practice would help ignite things I had not directly perceived, remembered or had not interpreted, or that perhaps, I felt were not analytically relevant at the time.

3.5. From Participant Observation to Interviewing (…and back again)

After entering the field and reflexively exploring my methodological 'failures' to date, I felt that instead of clinging to (*what now seemed*) inadequate and misguided plans operating on a number of flawed and unarticulated assumptions in the face of emerging problematics, I would embrace the necessity to, reflexively and critically, adapt and refine. I considered many of my failings were born from the limits of thinking in advance alongside the many unnoticed and as such, unarticulated, governmentalizing "illusions" that were structuring my methodologic praxis (in the field) and 'imprisoning' (Deleuze, 1968/2004, pp. xv) me in my own subjectivity; perhaps evidence of the 'tree growing in my head' as Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2007, pp. 15) might have it. So, I started to view my 'failures' not as such, but as methodological tensions, as "stuck places" and 'ruins' (Lather, 2013; see Lather, 2005, 2011, 2016), to be explored and negotiated to provide moments of/for transformation. Marcus & Fischer (1986, pp. 166) once noted: "…in periods when fields are without secure foundations, [*reflexive*] *practice becomes the engine of innovation*" (*my emphasis*).

I continuously and reflexively thought about the what's and how's of my study and, the why's of my practices, to continuously refine my approaches. In so doing, I effectively abandoned the kind of linearly staged, phased and artificially separated thinking structuring initial methodologic plans. I didn't want to confine myself, my subjectivity or my methodological praxis, to following received wisdom regarding the conventional ordering of the "research act" (Denzin, 1989). The more I thought about it, I felt these kinds of artificial methodological separations of stages and phases, say of separating participant observations and interviewing, or collecting and analysing, or thinking, doing and writing, seemed absurd given my iterative approaches.

As such, participant observations didn't really 'end' and nor did interviews truly 'begin' in any conventional sense. It seems ridiculous to think we stop observing and/or participating when we start talking to people during formal interviewing; *what might we think we are doing in an interview if not, ourselves, also participating in the constructions and performances we later report?* And, to

me, it also seems ludicrous to operate on the assumption that only the talk captured on an audio recorder in the formal (artificial) setting of a research interview is all that constitutes interview data. This is simply a socio-historically contingent and limited understanding of this practice.

Conversations I had in the corridors, in the smoking shelter, in the programme office, while eating lunch all, to my mind, constituted (informal) interviews. Informal conversations like these may even be considered much more *naturalistic* than the more 'unnatural' formal research interview (Walford, 2001). Kvale (1996, pp. 14) remarks an *inter*-view should be seen an *interchange of views* between two or more people situating the centrality of dialogic interaction for knowledge production, further emphasizing the social situatedness and co-constructedness of our interview data, implicating ourselves directly (Walford, 2001, pp. 90). This stands in contrast to conventional understandings and approaches to research interviewing where, more often than not, the researcher questions and the participant answers, and roles rarely reverse. Kvale's (1996) perspectives speak to the kind of essential *intersubjectivity* involved in meaning-making (*see,* Cohen *et al.*, 2007, pp. 349). Walford (2001, pp. 90) similarly remarks on how interviewers and interviewees, essentially, co-construct interview data. So too, Walford argues research interviews are not in any way organic but rather are artificial, strategic and directive encounters usually fraught with imbalanced power relations, i.e. the 'questioning researcher' and the 'answering participant'. Holstein & Gubrium (1997) similarly expound a postmodernist take on meaning-making in the conventional research interview proposing a reformulation of commonplace practice and technique through balancing considerations of the 'hows' (i.e. interview technique and the interactional narrative procedures of knowledge production) and the 'whats' (i.e. focus of questions and substantive nature of what is communicated). They warn against an imbalance towards either suggesting "researchers take a more 'active' perspective" (*ibid*, pp. 114) and recognise their "unavoidably collaborative" (*ibid,* pp.126) place as *both* activators of "the circumstances of construction" (*ibid*, pp. 117) and co-constructors themselves. And, I tried to reflect these understandings in my own interviewing practices.

3.5.1. Interviewing Practices

As a result of initial analyses of participant observational data, a range of working analytic-interpretive ideas and themes were developed that shaped continued participant observational data collection and provided stimulus for interviewing.

Given my iterative, interpretive approaches, my growing postmodern and poststructuralist sensibilities, and an over-riding desire to let the field and the data lead me rather than vice versa, I conducted in-depth, semi-or loosely structured interviews to 'test out' and develop my interpretive ideas. I opted for semi- or very loosely structured interviews to try to remain as open as possible to nascent ideas emerging in/through interaction.

Of course, I planned interviews well, thinking about the kinds of questions I would ask and how these should be phrased and framed, developing long lists of potential topics, questions and even synoptic notes for myself. These initially expansive lists were then progressively crystallised; the logic being that 3-4 topics, with a sub-set of relevant secondary questions and probes, would be more than enough to cover an interview roughly an hour-long and leave space for mor in-depth discussions.

However, again, I was wary of bringing too many of my own preconceived ideas to interviews which may unduly close-off other areas participants found important to explore. Prepare too much and you close-off emergent possibilities yet, fail to prepare and an interview might fail to examine our working interpretive ideas. This, of course, is another impossible balancing act; it is not possible to 'bracket off' our subjectivities and ignore our imbrication in the construction of our data in these ways.

I thought deeply about the kinds of questions to ask and how, and what analytic-interpretive issues these questions were designed to speak to producing lists of questions with lists of secondary probes and prompts – forming loose interview 'guides'. The content of my 'guides' emerged

primarily from analyses and interpretations made of participant observational data alongside engagement with extant literature. Subsequent interviews, then, drew on this *and* emerging interview data – not simply confined to that specific participant.

While interviewing, I tried to be confident about my knowledge of the data and the study's pertinent interpretive themes to be able to conduct interviews without slavishly following my own 'guide' and not deviating. In this sense, ironically, I felt divergence was an important opportunity to 'plan' for.

I normally began interviews by briefly discussing with participants the things I *hoped* we could talk about, starting by asking 'easy', open, descriptive questions to get them speaking at length. Progressively, then, I asked more detailed, specific or complex questions, listening intently and following up on participants answers with appropriate questions to examine or problematise a story or idea more. I often adopted a tactic of 'playing dumb' (*what I informally called 'the Colombo method'*) to get people to explicate their ideas more, trying to position my participants as the 'experts' in these encounters – and addressing imbalanced power relations and my potentially problematic performances in the field in this respect.

I conducted multiple interviews where possible, however, it is worth noting that arranging and conducting interviews was repeatedly difficult. After completing the college's staff induction training as a condition of my access, I had a chance to speak to a senior figure in Human Resources about my particular circumstances and needs as a researcher. I wanted to give all my participants –*students, staff, parents, etc.* – the opportunity to dictate the terms of their interviews, first and foremost. I wanted to respect participants' autonomy and let them decide where and when interviews would be conducted, and in part, what we talked about. However, I was informed that due to the college's mandatory child protection and safeguarding policies, this democratic approach was not possible with students. For instance, I could not interview students off-campus; any interviews on-campus also needed to take place in a public, windowed office, during college hours. I was also required to inform Jason when student interviews would take place. This made it problematic to firstly, ensure

there was parity of the terms and conditions of participation among different participant groups, and secondly, to ensure what I saw as fair and ethical practice with regards to students.

Likewise, given students' college days are full and their studies taxing, I felt their 'free' time should be kept that way as far as possible. Therefore, finding time to conduct interviews during college hours was difficult. I was also told I could not contact students through any 'unofficial' channels; interviews had to be arranged via the college internal e-mail so records could be kept. These, and a number of other institutional policies and exigencies, made planning and conducting interviews with students somewhat challenging – as well as making me worry that I was complicit in an erosion of their right to anonymity in respect of participation in the research by having to inform Jason and conduct interviews in 'public' spaces.

So too, with mentors and other staff, different challenges presented. Firstly, these people are employees. Therefore, I had to be diplomatic about how much time I required them to devote to my research activities for fear this might draw negative attention from senior management and lead to feelings of resentment. Often interviews needed to be conducted during breaks or lunches, or after the college day – even though, in the same sense as students 'free' time, I was wary of asking this of equally busy staff. For instance, interviews were practically impossible around the time of personal statement submission deadlines, official UCAS submission deadlines, or during 'exam season' – which accounts for a large amount of the college calendar. Interviews with staff were mainly conducted during 'slack' times of the year, for instance, directly before/after half-term breaks, or holidays.

In instances where I was able to conduct second, third, fourth, etc. interviews, I would use the same ideas and stories participants communicated in previous interview as the primary stimulus for further questioning, frequently using their own quotes to instigate deeper explorations and conversations often playing 'Devil's advocate'. The purpose of this was to get participants to critically and reflexively explore *their own* ideas in more detail, while introducing the analytic-

interpretive connections I had drawn from theirs and others' data. The logic was to expose

participants to (*gentle*) critical questioning to encourage reflexivity and active interpretation. I felt it

was important to work in this way to, at least, feel assured the central ideas supporting my analytic-

interpretive notions were grounded primarily in participants' talk and experiences.

4.1. 'Methods' of Analysis and Interpretation

4.1.1. Methods assemblage

Law (2003, pp. 11) argues, "our methods are always more or less unruly assemblages". Law (2004, pp. 14), in *After Method*, reflects on the "character of allegory as a method for non-coherent representation" as one example to explicate his positions on "methods assemblages" (*ibid*), stating:

> "All of these are modes of knowing, *methods assemblages, that do not produce or demand neat, definite, and well-tailored accounts*. And they don't do this *precisely because the realities they stand for are excessive and in flux, not themselves neat, definite, and simply organised*. But this does not mean that they are not good methods." (*ibid, my emphasis*)

A "methods assemblage", according to Law (*ibid,* pp. 41), is "an uncertain and unfolding *process*" (*my emphasis*); a multiplicity; a 'sheaf' – "the complex structure of a weaving, and interlacing" (Derrida, 1982, pp. 3). Law notes Deleuze & Parnet's (1987, pp. viii) idea that "in a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is 'between'". A methods assemblage is a "*process* of bundling, of assembling, or better of recursive self-assembling" (Law, 2004, pp. 42, *my emphasis*) through which methodological ideas, tools, strategies and techniques, including 'material' objects, are combined, performatively enacted and embodied based on no fixed prior order or design "but are constructed at least in part as they are entangled together" (*ibid*). As such, and Law develops these arguments much more thoroughly throughout the book, there are no fixed rules, formulas or algorithmic procedures for determining the constitution these 'sheafs' or 'bundles' – *method assemblages* – in advance nor, equally importantly, how we ought go about enacting them. Conventional notions and specifications regarding the choice, combination and use of method/s, alongside common stepwise or separated approaches to their use, thus seemed anathema to my developing 'critical subjectivity' (*see* Tillema, *et al.,* 2008).

To begin to think against this weightiness of convention in my own work, I wanted to (re)think my chosen methods of analysis and interpretation, and their combination, in a much 'messier' fashion that I felt may allow me to generate incipiently 'new' and productive interconnections and cross-fertilisations. Instead of becoming preoccupied with following prescriptions and uncritically acquiescing to "lists of do's and don'ts" (Law, 2004, pp. 40) with regards the technical and 'correct' use of methods, I decided to focus more so on *process* and reflexivity.

I conceived my "methods assemblage", it's constitution and 'use' in this study, as drawing on many different analytic-interpretive styles, approaches, techniques and instruments in a non-linear, overlapping, critically multiplistic, multi-layered, creative, messy, and 'nomadic' (*see* Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2007; Sellers, 2009; 2015) manner; considering it as "a strategy without finality" (Derrida, 1982, pp. 7). I have thus also tried to be methodologically, theoretically and philosophically promiscuous, exposing myself to a wide range of ideas and perspectives in an attempt to foster a most "rigorous confusion" (St. Pierre, 1997, pp. 280-281). Though, it is worth noting at this point that this, in itself, is highly challenging and a frequently uncomfortable practice and disposition to adopt, in part, because it so deeply diverges with how we have been historically taught and trained to think, act and use 'methods' in the academy in our research work.

4.2. Beginning again and again and again and again…: Initial Data Analysis

4.2.1. Initial Processing of Data

Analysis began with the 'raw material' of my field notes prior to collecting formal interview data. I read and re-read transcripts, highlighting interesting words, expressions and practices I felt were analytically interesting or important. I scribbled notes, thoughts and comments in the margins which became the seeds of developing interpretations. After this, I would ruminate on my data for some time, then go back to read again and scrawl more notes across the data trying to develop and/or rupture my own emerging interpretations as I collected more data. In this way, I felt I began to inhabit the data, and vice versa. The more I did this, the more I could feel interpretive ideas, analytic hunches and (inter)connections strengthen or wither as I continuously engaged with the data iteratively.

But, analysis and interpretation did not just take place during these processes. Whether we appreciate it or not, we are always unavoidably analysing and interpreting. My interpretations did not only arise during (formal) analysis. In some ways, our interpretations precede us, forming before we 'begin', then become shaped through our inquiries and continue to develop long after our research 'ends'. That is, our subjectivities are performative and ever changing, transforming as we go about our knowing work critically and reflexively examining ourselves, our practices and the data we construct resulting in new identifications and practices underpinned by a 'new' power/knowledge position(ing). In this way, we are never the same from moment to moment and can use the "dissonant thinking" (Bernauer, 1990, pp. 90) our ever-changing subjectivities and multiple 'new' knowledge positions provide, to explore new ways of being and doing.

As noted earlier, field notes were rather dense and somewhat unstructured beasts to work with – and when interview data was added, the matter of volume, direction, foci, etc. were all compounded again. So, the first task in beginning to formalize analysis was to try to process and 'reduce' the data into more manageable forms based on the emerging broad analytic-interpretive areas of interest.

4.2.2.1. How?

Participant observation data was processed and, based on a tentative critical discursive analysis, a range of ideas, concepts, themes and analytics were constructed to inform subsequent data collection at interview. Willis (2000, pp. x-xi), I think, articulates this practice very well:

> "Imagine that I am a bit of an *academic vandal*, in the nicest possible and disciplined way. I take, develop or invent ideas (while immersed in the data) and throw them, in a 'what if' kind of way, at the ethnographic data – the real world of the nitty-gritty, the messiness of everyday life – to see what analytic points bounce out on the other side, pick them up again, refine them and throw them again."

To aid intelligibility of my working habits, I will take as an example my analysis of UCAS personal statements.

Personal statement writing was a central activity at *Brook College*, dominating pedagogical proceedings for several months each year. It was this obvious position of local importance at *Brook College* which spurred me to pursue this area further. After *very broadly* selecting, extracting and organising participant observation data on personal statements, I started to more specifically examine the kinds of practices, embedded discourses and performances/performativities involved in UCAS personal statements, on students' experiences undertaking this task, the kinds of information and support mentors provided, what kind of meaning/s individuals attached to the activity, and how these meanings, practices and discourses related to students' social identities and (dominant) understandings of HE. Through this, I started to notice a number of discontinuities between 'official' discourse and associated practices related to personal statement writing. As such, the focus of (still, at this stage, on-going) participant observations oriented, in part, towards this "sensitizing concept" (Blumer, 1954, IN*:* Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 212) of discontinuity and contradiction. Through this form of iterative data collection and analysis, then, numerous connected analytic-interpretive ideas and themes began to emerge, coalesce and strengthen, or wither.

Using 'working' ideas as stimulus, I then began interviewing, testing out my ideas in partnership with students and staff "to see what analytic points bounce[d] out on the other side" (Willis, 2000, pp. x-xi). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and furnished with available non-textual features (*i.e. vocal cadence, tone, body language, laughs, gasps, pauses, etc*.). Interview transcripts were then exposed to the same kinds of 'informal' analytic-interpretive processes participant observation data were exposed to – starting with cycles of (re)reading and note-making.

Initially, interviews were analysed in relative isolation. For instance, it would regularly be the case that interviews, on their own, elicited unique ideas, interpretations and themes not evident in fieldnotes or other interviews, but which nonetheless seemed interesting and valuable. There is also something of a necessity to treat interviews in this way, at first at least. Denzin (2012, pp. 23, IN: Baker & Edwards (2012)), drawing on Psathas (1995, pp. 50), makes reference to the 'method of instances' in discourse analysis of interview data, citing Fiske (1994, pp. 195), and arguing:

> *"…*no utterance is representative of other utterances, though of course it shares structural features with them*;* a discourse analyst studies utterances in order to understand how the potential of the linguistic system can be activated when it intersects at its moment of use with a social system."

It is a massively fallacious leap to assume that what one does (or says one does), says and how, will generally correspond with another individual. Nor, it should be noted, that what one person says in one utterance, during one interview, is essentially and/or automatically congruent with what they might say on another occasion. Even though people may be engaged in the same kinds of tasks, towards the same ends, with similar meanings attached, no one person's viewpoint can achieve equivalency with anyone else's, not even one's own. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that any individuals' or groups meanings will remain fixed over time, context and situation. No one view of the world can 'confirm' another, though, as Geertz (1973) might posit, each may 'thicken' the other. Obviously, we wish to appreciate convergences (as well as, divergences) in our data, however, this is by no means a *sine qua non* property of them. Therefore, each individual interview should be

analysed, firstly, in and of itself for the specific subjective dimensions of that individual's meaning-making activities.

Furthermore, what may be important to one person (on one occasion) may not be to another and as researchers, we need not insist that for an analytic-interpretive idea to pursued it should be unanimous across participants; this would correspond to more neo-positivistic notions of confirmation (or, falsification), generalisability and replicability that act as categories supporting dominant ideas of 'validity'. Some of the most elemental aspects of the analyses and interpretations offered here take off from perhaps a single word, a confusing expression, an off-the-cuff remark or story, an idea introduced in passing, an interesting quote from a piece of literature, a provocative philosophical imaginary, an interesting idea that occurred to me in the shower or on the train home while thinking about the data.

But this isolated approach only gets us so far. I needed to (re)combine interview data and (re)incorporate these with participant observation data to continue building my analysis – attending both to confirmations and contradictions, convergences and divergences.

I, then, started to re-process the data around personal statements again. Working back through the entire (and still growing) corpus, I engaged in another series of (re)readings starting to add data I felt 'fitted', was relevant or provided insight to practices and experiences of personal statement writing; things that seemed interesting, problematic and/or potentially illuminative or explanatory of my emerging interpretive notions. I always tried to err on the side of caution in this practice, including everything which could be relevant, as opposed to unduly stripping out data so early on – though, the data still needed functionally reduced. This sub-corpus of extracted data that related to personal statements was then compiled into, what I came to call, analytic documents.

My analytic documents were much more manageable than raw data, though were themselves still hundreds of pages long and difficult to work with. And so, I began again in the same ways. Reading, re-reading, making notes atop notes, re-reading again, engaging relevant literature, social theory

and philosophy, adding and considering ideas I picked up along the way and rejecting others. In this way, I tried to develop and progress my analysis at a greater/deeper level. I tried to embrace the frustrating glaciality but provocative indeterminacy, complexity and messiness in/of these processes. Through this, a large number of interpretive ideas, themes and sub-themes related to personal statements began to emerge such as: *specific-general, personal-impersonal, past-future, 'standing out from the crowd', (mythical) admissions tutors, implied characteristics, practices of textual construction*, to name a few.

To develop these analytic-interpretive ideas still further, I engaged in a form of 'mind-mapping' to messily 'sketch' out the various ideas and their possible connections. I tried not to 'sketch' out ideas in a top-to-bottom, left-to-right, or otherwise uni-directional fashion, instead, trying to place interpretive ideas, themes, etc. and data references in a connected but free-floating way. I was trying, firstly, to resist a linear reading of my data, and secondly, a linear construction of interpretive connections. I tried to juxtapose (seemingly) disparate data to see if interesting or analytically pertinent (inter)connections could be drawn, and in doing so, I progressed my thinking constructing a more 'complete' interpretive-analytic picture for myself to get a better sense of what I was doing and pursuing. This also helped indicate the areas of literature I should be engaging with to develop the analysis further still at the theoretical level. Some examples of these messy analytic-interpretive maps can be seen in Appendix 2.

And, of course, following messy mapping and the productive cross-fertilisations that occurred, I went back to the data (again) to refine my ideas, only to map again, until I felt I reached a(n arbitrary) limit.

4.3. Formal(ising) analysis

4.3.1. Critical discourse analysis

At this point (and usually before I felt fully ready), I had to knit this messy analytic-interpretive thinking work together and felt I needed to formalise and 'systematise' my critical discursive analysis. I considered, early in fieldwork, the use of qualitative data management and analysis packages such as *NVivo*; however, after some training I felt ill at ease with what essentially seemed like 'passing the analytic-interpretive buck'. Though, more acutely for me as a researcher who wished to be informed by the subversive positions and critiques of postmodernism and poststructuralist theorising, the structuralist notion of analysis ossified by fixed 'genetic' coding categories, schemes and 'trees' – *in the way NVivo does* – was not how I wanted to work.

Whether we agree or not with the "scientism[*s*] of [*these generally*] positivist […] descriptors" (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, pp. 630) and practices, we perhaps shouldn't be so quick to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'. Ideas like systematicity, "audit trail[s]" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) or a "chain[s] of evidence" (Yin, 1982, pp. 91), and their associated/implied notions of validity, reliability, etc. are not inextricably embedded in and tied to one paradigm despite the fact they may often appear so. Richardson & St. Pierre (2005, pp. 968) cite Spivak's (1974, pp. xv) concern that we are always somewhat obligated to work with(in) the current "resources of the old language, *the language we already possess and which possess us*" (*my emphasis*). The (apparent) common sense of these 'scientisms' lies in their hegemonic status, in their phantasmic "objectivity" (Laclau, 1990, pp. 34), entrenchment and naturalisation. Laclau & Mouffe (1985), however, stress that hegemony is always under threat from what it has necessarily excluded in the "infinitude of the field of discursivity" (pp. 113). So, while we may not agree with them, they are perhaps necessary for us all to explicitly think-out *in the contexts of our own work*. I don't feel it's good enough to say '*I don't see it this way*' and sweep them aside. Rather, we should try to un- or re-think them and construct their meaning and legitimacy (*or not*) in the specific context/s of our own inquiries – Lather's (1993)

Fertile Obsessions is a good example of how we might go about this un-/re-thinking work with regards to the notion of validity. And, for me, this critical ethic extends to all other commonplace '(social) scientific' categories and practices. Marcus & Fischer (1986, pp. 166) noted over 30 years ago: "in periods when fields are without secure foundations, [*reflexive*] practice becomes the engine of innovation". Thus, we needn't "be constrained by [*the*] habits of somebody else's mind" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, pp. 964) and follow convention, tradition or received wisdom uncritically. There is *always* space and resources with which to un/re/think such "floating signifiers" (Laclau, 1990, pp. 28; Laclau, 1993, pp. 287) that sediment around nodal points of the discourses of epistemology and research methodology, becomes naturalised, but that profoundly impact us, our subjectivities and research practices. We only need ask of ourselves: what would this mean *in my work?* Citing Derrida's (1994, pp. 59) famous problematising question, we should ask: "what must now be thought and *thought otherwise*?" (*my emphasis*)

Certainly, I felt a strong urge to conduct my critical discursive analysis *systematically* – in the sense of being really organised about it. Despite my reservations about systems like NVivo, I felt some systematisation was practically necessary to simply keep track of large amounts of data and ideas constantly moving back and forth in my thinking and writing.

4.3.1.1. Whats and Whys

Formal analysis in this study is best described as a thematic, index-card based, theoretically informed style of critical discourse analysis harnessing 'Foucauldian' and Faircloughian (2001a, 2001b) perspectives and approaches. Before continuing to describe the 'hows' of my approach, it is perhaps worth briefly exploring my understandings of discourse and critical discursive analysis; the 'whats' and 'whys'.

Firstly, it is often cited Foucault opposed outlining a method for his work (*hence my '…' around Foucauldian above*). This, however, stands in contrast to Fairclough's more structured approach, which draws on many of Foucault's principle ideas. As an inexperienced researcher I felt some form of direction/directive method would be helpful.

Foucault's work is vastly interdisciplinary, drawing on – at least – philosophy, social anthropology, political theory, 'science', history, literature, art and linguistics. It seems to make sense, then, *to me anyway,* that the critically reasoned adoption of a pluralistic methodological-analytical approach may be a somewhat Foucauldian-led notion. In this sense, my approach to critical discourse analysis drew on both Foucault's and Fairclough's contrasting styles, as well as a range of other notable discourse analysts practicing and theorising in this theoretico-methodologic field (*such as* Gee, 1999; MacLure 2003a, 2003b; McClosky, 2008; Tonkiss, 1998; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Focuault, 1969, 1972, 1982; Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Schiffrin *et al.*, 2001) and a range of other styles of inductive textual analysis. For instance, I studied appraoches to narrative methodology and analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Bruner, 2004), grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and content-analysis (Krippendorp, 2004) attempting to incorporate insights and techniques from these appraoches into my own conceptualisation and practice of critical discourse analysis.

Fairclough is regularly considered one of the 'key' figures of *systematic* critical discourse analysis, and as opposed to Foucault, has written widely on his methodologic approaches to critical discourse analysis as both theory and method from the perspective of functional socio-linguistics. A Faircloughian approach views discourse as "an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, pp. 3) where the "meaning-laden architectures" (Fairclough *et al.,* 2004, pp. 5) of discourse/s are inseparable from 'the social' and the broader context/s from which they emerge, circulate and function.

Discourse is, then, not only what is said but also how it is said within a specific social context (Archer, 2000) and the system that enables or constrains what can be said, and the subject positions that may be performed. Therefore, we must view "language as a form of social practice" (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 20). Simply, discourses 'do things'; they are performative instances of 'language in use'. Yet, while discourses are produced within specific contexts, they are also in part, constitutive of those context/s too and, equally, shaped by those contexts dialectically. As such, a(ny) discourse cannot reasonably be understood de- or a-contextually (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). A conventional reading of Faircloughian approaches to critical discourse analysis would, to my mind, focus more so on the lexical, grammatical, semantic and latent minuatiae of langauge and its use as a form of social practice. Such approaches focus more so on the systemic structuring of semiotic difference in hierarchized meaning-making activities in terms of *orders, genres* and *styles* of discourse.

Like Fairclough (2001a, pp. 121), I understood critical discourse analysis as "as much theory as method" (*see also* Fairclough, 1992, 2001b). However, Fairclough's approaches seemed, to me, too rigidified, too microscopic and too reliant on pre-specified analytic concepts and categories like *orders, genres* and *styles*. At the same time, aspects of Fairclough's systematic functional linguistics approaches did appeal to me – for instance in 'coding'. From a more poststructuralist 'tradition' of deconstruction (*not that such a 'tradition' could be said to exist to which the term 'deconstruction' corresponds*), I decided 'coding' could help facilitate a fine-grained, close reading of my data through which (dis)continuities, inconsistencies, rhetorical oppositions, gaps and exclusions could be identified, further allowing me to identify distinct particularities of representation, meaning-making and the context of their deployment. Though, to try and combat the microscopic and decontextualized nature of many approaches to data 'coding', I felt it important not to too strictly define what constituted a 'code' or discursive 'category', instead thinking in the more abstracted and interpretive sense of 'themes'. As such, I tried to analytically select data which 'spoke to' certain

larger thematics and 'code with context' to ensure extracted data were placed in their wider conversational/discursive context.

Additionally, continuing to think of critical discourse analysis as both 'theory *and* method' led me to explore Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) 'theory of discourse' in *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*. Particularly in the later stages of analysis and interpretation, I found Laclau & Mouffe's (*ibid*) theories, ideas and concepts extremely provocative and helpful not simply analytically speaking, but also in understanding other theorist's views and approaches better.

4.3.1.2. Hows

Working now from my interpretively constructed analytic documents, I started the process of "fragmenting" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) the data around the working analytic ideas, themes and sub-themes. I used a variety of coloured index-cards to 'pluck out' extracts of data from the *analytic documents*, placing them in one or many of working themes and/or sub-themes, labelling them with their unique fieldnote, interview or artefact number and page number/s for ease of reference.

Once this largely (*but not totally*) mechanical thematic 'coding' procedure was 'complete', I went back to messily re-map the ideas, themes and sub-themes again – this time, focusing more on the kinds of meanings being articulated and performances these implied, tying these together (or not), and developing the analysis more so at a theoretical level. After this, *again*, I started 'coding' and mapping again, refining themes and throwing others away, inventing new ones as I felt warranted; acting the "academic vandal" (Willis, 2000, pp. x).

This to-ing and fro-ing process (*see* Deleuze & Parnet, 1987/2002), while productive, was very slow and somewhat frustrating. It was so incremental, in fact, that it was often difficult to appreciate the subtle movements carrying me and the analysis along. However, the analysis and interpretations gradually, 'nomadically', by process of gradual accretion began to form. For *personal statements*, I

engaged my 'coding' process three times – slowly refining, shaping and connecting interpretations to construct a sense of a central story.

At this point, though, the cyclic processes of (re)reading, noting, messy-mapping and formalised thematic, discursive 'coding' processes seemed to reach its (temporary) limits. Interpretive-analytic ideas had now sedimented, had been critically pushed and pulled here and there or thrown away such that I started becoming more confident in my ideas. Now, I felt, I needed to write something.

But, it was during writing that I realised my analysis was still not 'complete'; far from it. Rather, these formalised processes of analysis were just a starting point. Most of my 'real' analysis, it seemed, took place in the attempted writing of analytic-interpretive accounts whereupon I began to understand just how incomplete it was. As Richardson & St.Pierre (2005, pp. 970-971) state "*thought happens in the writing*" through the interrelationship of text, topic and writer, and this it seemed, took me somewhat by surprise.

4.4. Writing down – Writing up

I now believe the greatest progress in the refinement of my analyses and interpretations took place, quite unexpectedly, during 'writing-up'. Upon reflection, I realised I had radically under-estimated writing by failing to appreciate it was as much a part of the processes of analysis and interpretation as any of the other sets of 'formal' processes I engaged in, and not simply a practice required to collect observational data or for representing prior thought.

It is, of course, quite common for research to be understood in two broad parts – *doing (fieldwork)* and *writing up* this doing – contributing to distorted conceptualisations and understandings of writing. University protocols for doctoral students reinforce this kind of thinking, like in the requirement we inform our institutions we have entered our 'writing-up phase' (as if we are not doing this all along).

In this way, the ties between *doing* and *thinking* (or '*inquiring-thinking-writing*' (Sellers, 2009)) are summarily cut, reinforcing a Cartesian logic and hierarchised subject-object relations. Of course, this is the way most of us have been taught to think and write from a young age and latterly in our academic training; that is, we shouldn't write anything until we know precisely what we want/are going to say. But this dominant "socio-historical construction" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, pp. 960) of scientific work and writing grossly simplifies or ignores some of our most common-sense ideas about doing fieldwork, analysing, interpreting, and the practice of writing and reporting in qualitative research.

I did not necessarily do my research *then* write an account of that doing. Rather, analytic-interpretive writing, as it turned out, was always already a part of the ongoing data collection and interpretive work of the research itself, not a 'phase' at the 'end'. What appear to be practical, technical and mechanistic activities like writing and transcribing field notes, for example, I understood were unavoidably interpretive acts. Richardson & St. Pierre (*ibid*) argue the dominant 'scientific' orthodoxy of doing *then* writing "coheres [sic] with mechanistic scientism[s] and

quantitative research" and offer, instead, a view on the productiveness of a more poststructuralist perspective on language and writing, stating:

> "Poststructuralism links language, subjectivity, social organisation and power. The centrepiece is language. *Language does not 'reflect' social reality but rather produces meaning and creates social reality* [...] Poststructuralism, then, permits – even invites or incites – us to reflect on our methods and to explore new ways of knowing [...] it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone [...] [*and so*,] *writing is validated as a method of knowing*" (*ibid*, pp. 961-962, *my emphasis*)

The postmodern "crisis of representation" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, pp. 252) in ethnographic authority has long since destabilised the practice of representational writing. The "crisis" refers to a breakdown of a simple correspondence theory of truth and associated practices of objective, textual *re*-presentation thus undermining classical 'scientific' authorial warrant. The 'postmodern turn' has moved us past metaphysicality through a subversion of Enlightenment 'scientific' reason (Flax, 1990, pp. 41-42) and its associated representationalist practices, to (re)position the essential subjectivity, relativity, positionality, partiality and ultimate constructed-ness and performativity of any writing/account. Beginning to situate my thinking more within this postmodern or maybe more accurately, poststructural frame, I thought I too ought move past this dominant mode of representationalism to a position where "discourse is all there is" (Butler, 1992, pp. 3), acknowledging "there is [*and can*] only [*ever be*] interpretation" (Denzin, 2017, pp. 12).

4.4.1. 'Writing-as-method' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005)

In rethinking writing, then, I took my cue from Richardson & St. Pierre (2005, pp. 959) and considered "*writing as a method of inquiry*" (*emphasis in original*). In this study, and in other work I have conducted during my doctorate, I have pondered on many aspects of writing. Collecting data in

the field by pen and paper, transcribing field notes, writing reflexive and analytic memos *to myself*, for example, encouraged me to think deeply on the practice of writing itself.

For a start, writing, transcribing and elaborating my fieldnotes seemed a relatively easy, albeit laborious task. But, I feel I quickly started to learn that these were not solely mechanistic acts of transcription of prior observations and interpretive thoughts; something else was happening. In writing up the fieldnotes I had already written down my mind was always (re)interpreting as I typed. Often, I would transcribe a chunk of fieldnotes with an attached interpretive memo and, by simply typing my own thoughts, new ideas and interpretations would emerge causing interpretations to proliferate. In fact, I began to feel I could not have made such analytic-interpretive progressions without writing. Barthes (1984/1986, pp. 318-19) once argued the powerful "will-to-method" results in a situation where "everything" is "put into the method" such that "*nothing remains for the writing*" (*my emphasis*). I now consider methods as, essentially, 'empty vessels' that merely provide starting points and that most of our analytic-interpretive work does indeed remain "for the writing".

As a result of the many methodological 'failures' I encountered and the "stuck places" I found myself, I often felt uncertain and insecure about what it was I was doing and felt a strong sense of indirection and doubt when it came to writing. It seemed the more data I collected and analysed, the less sure I was of anything. No single, neat or coherent (set of) stories emerged from the data that would signpost how I should proceed, and this was very unsettling. In fact, I realised there were many possible interesting and overlapping stories I *could* tell about this data with no logical place to start or end, nor any obvious way to choose between them.

When the time came, then, I found writing analytic-interpretive accounts very difficult and felt extremely reticent to begin. In truth, I often procrastinated or avoided the task in any number of ways because I had a naïve belief I couldn't write because I wasn't sure of anything.

Consider the following reflexive memo to myself, replete with self-consciousness, doubt and insecurity about the quality, 'substance' and directionality of my work, and what it was (I felt) I was supposed to be 'making' with my data:

> "I'm getting a bit nervous over the past months that, frankly, the research is not living up to its billing; or, I am not living up to the billing as the lead researcher; the 'bricoleur'. Point of fact: (and as other people often say) I don't think I'm even sure what this project is really about (yet). It's about HE, yes, but HE is a big 'thing'. It's certainly not about personal statements, or Oxbridge students, or the A-Level Mindset, or A-Level & Vocational hierarchies. So, what is it about?
>
> Recently, when people have (terrifyingly) asked me, 'What's your PhD about?' I've either dismissed or deflected the question with wry wit, saying: "When I know, you'll know". It's funny. We all get it. But, I never really reflected on what I was actually saying. It does expose something I am truly worried about – what exactly is it I'm building towards? What questions are my analyses supposed to be answering? Is 'question' and 'answer' even the correct terminology for what I'm doing?
>
> What should I be writing? There are lots of 'stories' I could tell. But, this expression – "when I know…" – assumes I will find out, at some stage, what I am doing through the doing itself and exposes my onto-epistemologic sensibilities and subjectivity. It suggests at some point, in the future, I will 'know' what I am doing/have done and why, by reflecting on what I have done and reflexively trying to understand 'why'. Maybe this is the 'mirror' of emergent design or iterativity, and the point of reflexivity. I can't labour on this too long though, I need to write. You'll work it out by working it out!" (FN28, pp. 54-55)

Nevertheless, time passed and with growing anxiety, usually well before I felt ready to, I had to get words on a page. But, how to do this when I wasn't sure what I should write, how I would arrange different 'bits' and what 'questions' my analyses were responding to. In fact, I started to question whether many these terms and categories were appropriate to structure my thinking and writing.

Obviously, I had my formalised analyses with a range of grounded analytic-interpretive ideas but, in themselves, these did not indicate how I should weave them together into an interesting, insightful

story. My Director of Studies (DoS) was very understanding and 'knew' things from experience that were still for me to learn. She instructed me to use my nervousness and uncertainty; to think *with it* and relieve myself of the pressure of 'getting it right' for nothing of the sort exists in representational terms; to simply start writing and try not to get weighed down by feelings of uncertainty but use these as productive tensions to develop my analyses through the writing itself.

The analyses and interpretations which, to this point, I (had naively) thought were largely 'complete' were evolving, expanding or exploding as I wrote. The ground that I stood on which I thought was fixed was actually constantly shifting under me. Things were happening during 'writing-up' that had not occurred during months of analytic work. The lines of interpretation I developed during formal analysis now, during writing, seemed to expand, diverge or break down completely as I tried to articulate them. I started to reflect that it may have been the dominant discursive conceptualisations and understandings of representational (social) scientific writing that were perhaps weighing me down and 'imprisoning' (Deleuze, 1968/2004, pp. xv) my ideas about analysis and writing, and my ways of working. My anxieties about 'getting it right' and analytically 'finding' a story somehow buried in my data simply awaiting excavation, I now feel, are precisely the kinds of feelings that would emerge from privileging and understanding analysis as a technical method and failing to appreciate writing-up is not representation, but itself constitutive, i.e. performative. I feel these are also the kinds of uncomfortable feelings that may emerge as a result of a certain dissonance between the fact that I felt I knew, *on one hand*, that representation was impossible and there was no single or 'correct' story to find and tell, but while still unavoidably being positioned by those hegemonic discourses and practical modes of social scientific writing. It was this ambivalent positioning, I feel, that fostered and heightened these anxieties about writing interpretive accounts – and about the 'quality' my research and myself as a researcher. So, I started to rethink and embrace writing as more like my experiences of fieldwork as undirected, indeterminate, messy and 'nomadic' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2007).

I was seldom ever sure where I was heading in my writing but, thankfully, I arrived at insightful places nonetheless by following the unpredictable ebbs and flows of interpretation that came about in and through writing. I was "*travelling in the thinking* that writing produces" (St. Pierre, 2000, pp. 258, *my emphasis*). Writing *was* a(nother) method of analysis and interpretation.

Again, I will take UCAS personal statements as a contextualising example of these realisations and my pivoted approach to 'writing-as-method'.

After feeling like I reached a limit through the formal analyses of personal statement data, I produced a detailed writing plan and slavishly tried to enact it. However, my writing far outstripped the plan I produced. At first, I felt dissatisfied I hadn't done justice to my own prior thinking. Reflexively exploring these feelings and talking about them with my DoS, I realised it was only by trying to 'fix' my analysis on paper that I became aware it was underdeveloped, even requiring additional data – and perhaps, stood in close relation to some unconscious and problematic representationalist beliefs. I realised my analyses and interpretations to this point were, at best, only starting points. What I had unconsciously and seductively believed was that my analysis was 'complete', and writing was simply articulating thinking already thought.

With my DoS acting as a 'critical friend', we engaged in extensive discussions about what it was I was actually trying to say; what was the story, or stories? Though, I was largely incapable of expressing what this was – and, this, in itself, was illuminative. I wasn't sure what story I should tell because there were many, and because analytic-interpretative thinking work can never truly be 'complete' meaning writing *was* an inextricable part of those never-ending analytic-interpretive processes. The stories were constantly 'under construction', as it were.

In my first drafts, I developed number of dyadic concepts I described as *contradictions*, such as *personal-impersonal*, *specific-general, past-future* alongside nested sub-themes such as *writing frames*, *symbolic proxies*, *(mythical) admissions tutors*, *specific literacies* and *"standing out from the crowd"*. From conversations with my DoS about the 'what/s' of my writing, I realised my analytic-

interpretive work was far from 'finished'. In fact, I had only scratched the surface. And so, I went back to the drawing board.

I repeated my card-based discursive analysis and 'messy mapping' again and again, except this time, I attempted to crystallise and refine my analytic-interpretive ideas further in an effort to better understand the story *I wished to* construct.

As I went back to my analytic documents*,* index-cards, maps and went back through the entire data set reengaging the formal(ised) processes of analysis, producing yet more cards and maps, I did start to get a better sense of a central story. However, similar problems presented when I tried to write again: How should I write this 'new' analysis?

I produced writing plans again in even greater detail, outlining the specific areas I wanted to cover broken down into sections and sub-sections with metaphorical, pithy or aphoristic interpretive headings. I included descriptive notes and directives for myself about the nature and sequencing of data and interpretations to create an interesting and unfolding story to guide my writing – and so I would not be dragged 'off topic' as I felt I had been before.

I started drafting again and, in doing so, elaborated and refined my 'new' analytic-interpretive themes more so at the theoretical level. The range of analytic-interpretive ideas and themes noted above were connected and grouped in more expansive and interpretive ways. For instance, the section regarding skills became organised under three broad(er) interpretive strands *Learning the Lingo, Learning the (t)ropes* and *Learning to Perform.* Likewise, an earlier piece of writing I had produced, titled *productive anxiety* – an account theorising how a context of panic was constructed around personal statement writing that activated and responsibilised students in specific ways – was fragmented and eventually informed aspects of the first personal statement sub-chapter (as well as my analysis of the A-Level Mindset).

In my second draft I felt my ideas start to thicken, deepen and move still further; nascent patterns began to emerge which provided 'new' interpretive directions to explore. One example of these 'new' analytic-interpretive directions produced through writing led me to undertake a (albeit, simplified) 'move-step analysis' (*see* Ding, 2007) of the semantic and latent content and construction of personal statements. Not something I ever intended to undertake, methodologically speaking, but an idea that emerged through an engagement with the process of writing as interpretation and that proved very helpful.

In composing my third, fourth, fifth and countless more drafts, editing and re-writing in this way, things gradually came into focus. *Contradictions*, as the analytic-interpretive 'framework' for personal statement chapters became the more dynamic notion of *paradoxes,* nuanced further as *balancing acts*. Paradoxes and balancing acts, then, became my writing's overarching interpretive conceptual structure; the broad lenses through which data and interpretations would be organised and articulated.

In this way, the account built up slowly by moving back and forth along the continua of description, explanation, interpretation and synthesis, while at the same time attempting to critically and reflexively examine myself, the processes and practices I was engaged in. Things were coming into evermore focus through the process of writing draft after draft. Eventually, it seemed, my thinking-writing appeared to naturally sequence and arrange itself. For instance, as I continued trying to write about skills in the context of the personal statement, my 'original' ideas grew to the point where it felt necessary to split these discussions off into its own dedicated sub-chapter.

And, this is (im)precisely how I went about all following analysis and writing coming to productively harness deliberate indirection, uncertainty, discomfort and critical reflexivity to progress.

What I felt I learned from my (mis)adventures in writing, was that the writing of analyses was an inseparable part of the processes it attempted to capture and represent. And further, that representing itself was a powerful but subtle illusion; the effects of which I would need to remain

constantly cognizant of. Ellis & Bochner (1996) note the "essence of ethnography" is "story-telling where the researcher is centrally involved in the *process and product*" (*my emphasis*). This view brings into sharp relief the essential inseparability of the 'processes' and practices of research and the 'products' we suppose to construct as a result. In fact, perhaps thinking in terms of a 'product' I thought I felt I *should* be producing is perhaps what weighed me down in the first place and proved, ironically, counter product-ive.

Though, lets be clear. I found writing a physically and emotionally challenging process. Eisner (1997, pp. 7) notes that when "[k]nowledge [*is seen*] as process" in these ways it can be "scary to many". And, indeed, (re)conceiving of 'writing-as-method' and trusting in the undirected and uncertain flows of inquiring-thinking-writing to lead us to where we wish to be was/is "scary". It feels so "scary", fraught with trepidation and anxiety because it is so radically incongruent with the ways we have been taught to think and write since we were children; and, even more so with the ways we have been schooled in the academy to go about our work. As such, these ideas are deeply stained in our subjectivities and research practices such that they are rarely easy to identify and even more challenging to work against.

Though, despite its challenge and discomfort, it is an emimently productive approach given its reflexive progressivity. The texts I have produced – *I hope* – convey a sense that they are only one piece of an assemblage of multiple stories far outstripping what could physically be reported. My accounts are partial and messy, reflexive, fragmented and stuttering because, in this sense, they are a reflection of the processes of analysis and interpretation that gave rise to them.

5.1. The UCAS Personal Statement

The following analytic-interpretive accounts focus on UCAS (University & Colleges Admissions Service) personal statements. UCAS is the organisation tasked with managing the system of undergraduate admissions to higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. UCAS handles the applications of UK, EU and International (non-EU) students applying to HEIs in the UK, from matriculating Level 3 and mature students alike.

The UCAS application process is composed of an in-depth, online application form completed by the student applicant and furnished with academic references from students' teachers. In the application form, all applicants are required to list personal details (including contact details, indications of financial support provisions, etc.) with UK-based applicants asked to provide additional information about their "background", "ethnic origin, national identity, any summer schools/taster courses you attended, care and parental education, and occupational background" (https://www.ucas.com/). Applicants, then, list their 5 course "choices" – the specific undergraduate or foundation courses they wish to apply to. UCAS permits individuals to apply, initially, for a maximum of five programmes of study at any HEI. These 5 choices are later reduced to 2 – a 'firm' and 'insurance' choice – as institutions begin responding to applications and extending either a) 'conditional' offers where entry is conditional upon achievement requirements set forth by the institution, or b) 'unconditional' offers with no specific entry requirements, usually baring successful completion of their A-Levels.

All applicants must also compose a "personal statement" described by UCAS as "the only part of the application process where you can write in your own style […] your opportunity to tell the universities and colleges why they should offer you a place on their course" (*video*: https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/apply-and-track/filling-your-ucas-undergraduate-application).

The UCAS personal statement is a free-text composition, limited to 47 lines or 4,000 characters, and used as a 'non-academic indicator'. Here, the applicant must describe themselves and their in the context of their current and previous educational experiences and achievements, alongside extra-curricular activities, to communicate their interest, passion and enthusiasm for a specific undergraduate course and demonstrate their ability and suitability for an institution or programme of study.

The personal statement is widely considered an applicant's opportunity to contextualise generic applications and convince an admissions tutor of their personal and academic suitability and capability over other applicants for the same courses – as the above quote from UCAS alludes. At *Brook College*, the personal statement was regarded as "the most important part of the application process" and was seen as the students' opportunity to construct a personal and persuasive account of themselves to secure a place on their course of choice in their institution of choice.

However, in *Brook College*, the personal statement was also described as the most "difficult part of the application" process (*UCAS Parents Guide 2016-17*). At the institutional level, then, students are supported through the "difficult" UCAS application process and personal statement writing by their dedicated Pastoral Mentors in weekly Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons and one-to-one meetings between student and mentor for most of a calendar year. Between Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons and one-to-one meetings, pastoral mentors provide students with a range of information, advice, guidance and instruction on how to compose the 'perfect' personal statement providing formative feedback on successive drafts. At *Brook College,* the task of personal statement writing was introduced to students late in their AS-Level year prior to formal introduction of HE applications, some 6-8 months before 'official' UCAS submission deadlines.

In the following analytic-interpretive accounts, I examine specific aspects of the personal statement, including the types of information, advice and guidance students receive, alongside dominant pedagogical rationalities, strategies and approaches designed to support students' production of a

'good' personal statement. Through this, I also explore a variety of practices and discourses circulating in, around and through the activity and how various stakeholders conceptualise and 'make sense' of what they are doing and why.

This analysis, titled *The Paradoxical Statement*, is split into two large sections. In the first section regarding *Course Choices,* I focus on students' choices of undergraduate programmes as they relate to dominant norms of personal statement writing and expectations of prospective students. Before students can begin to write their personal statement, they must pick their 5 undergraduate course choices. Dominant normative discourses regarding academic/disciplinary consistency of students' course choices arise from a range of assumed conventional requirements and expectations for how personal statements should be written alongside considerations of the perceptual implications of their self-articulations for admissions tutors. In this section, I utilise the conceptual notions of *paradoxes* and *balancing acts* as analytic devices to loosely frame data and interpretations.

In the second, larger section – *Skills & The Personal Statement* – I explore the central position 'skills' occupy in the personal statement. Every part of the personal statement, it seems, hinges on students communicating they possess certain required, expected or desired skills in the context of their prior educational and extra-curricular activities, experiences and achievements. In this part of the analysis, I deploy three analytic-interpretive themes, namely *Learning the "Lingo", Learning the (t)ropes* and *Learning to Perform,* to structure and organise data and interpretations regarding skills and personal statements. These interpretive strands will be explained in more detail in the prelude to each section of analysis.

The rationale for splitting my analysis of personal statements in this way is rather mundane. Simply put, during my continuing analysis of data relating to personal statements I began to appreciate the position of importance "skills talk" (Bridges, 1993, pp. 43) occupied. As I continued collecting and analysing data iteratively, the data I collected relating to 'skills' began to far outstrip any other. Therefore, I started to focus more and more on collecting data to develop my interpretations on

skills, specifically, until this sub-corpus of data became so large that I could not but treat it individually.

In a simple sense, the two sections of analysis generally (loosely) refer to: a) preparing students for writing personal statements through choosing courses and conducting HE research, and, b) how students are supported by a variety of staff to compose their personal statements using the language of skills. The sections, then, are intimately connected despite being (artificially) separated here for ease of reading and analytic-interpretive structure.

5.2. The Paradoxical Statement

5.2.1. Paradoxes & Balancing Acts

In the following section of this analytic account, several concepts are deployed to arrange data and interpretation. What became evident during analysis of data relating to personal statements was the presence of certain contradictions; what I came to call *paradoxes*. This orienting notion of paradoxes*,* I believe, provides an loose analytic framework through which the practices, rules and conventions governing the composition of personal statements, as well as the beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and experiences of individuals involved in this process, can be located and examined. Perhaps, before I continue, a 'definition' of a paradox may be helpful. Lewis (2000) describes a paradox as:

> "contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation
>
> but absurd & irrational when appearing simultaneously" (pp. 760)

I would like to draw attention to an important point in Lewis' (*ibid*) definition, i.e. the *interrelation* of contradictory elements. In Lewis' (*ibid*) description, divergent "elements" in isolation may "seem" logical however, when such antithetical constructs are deployed together, they become "absurd & irrational".

Nuancing the concept of paradoxes, I also use the notion of balancing acts. I believe the more dynamic idea of balancing acts permits a focus on how and through which discursive systems contradictory elements are "interrelated" (*ibid*) and function contingently. Furthermore, questions of 'how' speak to social practices. The concept of balancing acts*,* then, permits attention to be paid to the active management and negotiation of contradictory elements as a social practice set within certain shaping contexts. Equally, balancing acts, perhaps more than paradoxes, accounts for the mutual contingency and dynamism of competing rationalities underpinning the performance of social practices and the discourses working in, around and through personal statement writing.

Students must find some sort of 'balance' between competing considerations and imperatives that must be actively managed and balanced against one another. In this sense, students must work the middle ground and become adept funambulists (*tight-rope walkers*) to be successful.

The contradictory messages communicated to students regarding the *whats*, *hows* and *whys* of personal statement writing frequently say one thing and mean another placing individuals on a continuum between two competing and confounding poles. Students are implicitly (and often, explicitly) told: 'Be specific, *but be general*'; 'choose courses freely, *but make sure they're all the same*'; 'conduct in-depth research, *but don't use this, at least not directly*'; 'be yourself, *but be the right kind of person "they're looking for and take care of appearances"*'; 'be original, *but follow the formula*'; '"stand out from the crowd", *but not too much*'. 'Do this and be that; but not too much, and not too little'. A veritable Goldilocks dilemma.

5.3. Course Choices

5.3.1. 'Be one thing'

In Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons and subsequent one–to–one meetings with students through the prolonged process of drafting and feedback, pastoral mentors teach students the 'rules of the game' of writing a personal statement. Many of these 'rules' formed around balancing aspects of specificity and generality to simultaneously maximise positive interpretive-perceptual effects and minimise negative ones in the minds of admissions tutors. An example of this, in the context of personal statements, is advice given to students about their five possible choices of undergraduate programme in UCAS applications.

The personal statement was regularly framed, by pastoral mentors, as both a highly specific, targeted piece of writing aimed at one particular course at one particular institution. However, by necessity, it also needed to be strategically general to make it seem as though it was/is not aimed at any one course or institution over another. In short, balance is required.

Given students can potentially apply to 5 different courses at 5 different institutions, meaning targeted specificity was not always seen as productive or beneficial. The understanding among mentors was that specificity must be bridled by a degree of generality. The problematic of understanding the personal statement in these ambivalent ways, as both specific and general, led to a confusing approach which suggested it must be 'all things to all people' yet, in equal measure, targeted. A mind–map poster entitled "My UCAS Personal Statement" in one classroom gestured towards this problematic:

> "Technicalities […] Remember, *there is only one personal statement, regardless of whether I apply for 1 or 5 courses*" (P139, pp. 222, *my emphasis*)

Because of this, mentors strongly advised students to ensure their 5 UCAS course choices were consistent and centred around a single subject area or discipline. During one Pastoral Tutor Group

Lesson, James (Pastoral Mentor) in somewhat joking fashion advised students it would be a bad idea, to apply for "Maths – Basket Weaving, and French in another place", stating choices should be "ideally similar or the same courses" (FN3, pp. 23–24). The logic of his advice was that, in order to write an effective, 'focused' personal statement students needed to choose the same or very similar courses. However, implicitly, many powerful messages are communicated in this relatively mundane expression. Drawing attention to the precise language James uses we can perhaps understand the embedded assumptions making up this paradoxical set of expectations.

Firstly, we should note the strong classificatory boundaries constructed between different subjects and disciplines of study – "Maths […] and French in another place". While it is probable James, by referring to "place", was referring to an institution, i.e. *this university or that*, there also appears a doubled meaning. Intellectually, academically and disciplinarily speaking "Maths" exists in one place and "French in another place". Maths and French exist in different academic worlds. One is in one discipline (*Sciences*) and the other "in another" (*Arts and Humanities*); two different 'places'. From this, students are to understand these areas of study as mutually exclusive. You may choose one or the other, but not both. The implication is that a person may only *be* one thing or the other – a Mathematician or a Linguist – never both. The underlying imperative here imposes a forceful homogeneity on students' choices that compels them: *be one thing*.

During another lesson, James characterised some students as being "absolutely crackers" (FN24, pp. 106) based on what he understood as an irresponsible use of precious time relative to *Brook College*'s 'internal' personal statement and UCAS's 'official' submission deadlines, which I feel links with his inclusion of "Basket Weaving" above.

Of course, no such degree exists, and it is this obvious absurdity which constitutes an important symbolic message for students. When set between two courses that *do* exist, the inclusion of "Basket Weaving" functions as an important relay highlighting the inhering irrationality and lunacy of choosing "Maths" *and* "French" together. A person who chooses Maths, French, and whatever

'different' courses marks themselves out as "crackers", as a 'basket–case', reinforcing the dominant conventions and inflecting character judgements around deviation from this norm.

Individuals who deviate the norm of consistent course choices, then, mark themselves out as (wilfully) irrational and irresponsible choosers. Indeed, students echoed similar attitudes in their thinking about course choices, even at A-Level. Maria (Student) said:

> Maria: "…some medical schools don't like you to pick Medicine alongside other things […] *it shows they think you're not prepared, or you're not confident in what you're choosing so they might not pick you* […] Like I have friends who do Biology and Textiles […] *they've no idea what they wanna do* […] Like people doing 3D Design alongside Maths, and I'm like, 'How?! Why?!'" (IT1MV – BC/ME, pp. 3–4, *my emphasis*)

Maria seemed baffled by her friends who chose "Biology and Textiles" or "3D Design alongside Maths" at A-Level, which she attributes to the understanding "they've no idea what they wanna do". Students can be easily marked out through their lack of an appropriately singular set of convictions reflecting back on them as lack certainty, confidence and 'preparation', in the same way students who choose Maths here, French there, or "Biology" with "Textiles", are seen as mindless, unprepared or uninformed, unconfident, uncertain and lacking 'passion' ultimately meaning "they might not pick you".

By contrast, students who choose 'appropriately', that is, singularly, *are* seen as focused, prepared, certain and confident; they are *single minded*. A student's choice of courses (and even, their choice of A-Levels as Maria notes) sub-textually communicates a great deal about the person making those decisions. Students need to be mindful of the potential perceptual risks involved in deviating this norm. Thus, the mitigation of risk becomes a significant consideration in students' choice of courses and a personal responsibility.

In conversation with Caroline (Pastoral Mentor), she noted how risk and responsibility are stitched together in the discourse of course choices:

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Caroline: "It's like you know when they apply for two different [*courses*], completely different subjects, like, at the end of the day *we wouldn't suggest that if they do that and it's going to put them at a distinct disadvantage* 'cos their personal statement will reflect that, but if they turned around and were like "No, I wanna apply for Biology and Creative Writing" then [pause]… *it's their decision*." (IT1Caroline – BC/ME, pp. 219*, my emphasis*)

Likewise, Carla*,* a representative of Manchester Metropolitan University invited to deliver a personal statement workshop, also noted:

Carla: "*I just think it's dangerous* if you're going for, someone say applying for radiography and then an Art and Design based course, because if you're applying for something health–based then *the kind of rule of thumb is that you kind of focus on becoming a Nurse or a Midwife and we would never expect to see anything else in there*. But I suppose if you have a mixture of courses […] in lots of cases we would prefer them to be, you know, just the academics and like '*I want you to tell me why you want to do just my course*' but it is difficult" (FN21, pp. 86*, my emphasis*)

Risk inserts itself, here, as a key component of this responsibilisation – "it'll put them at a distinct disadvantage", "it's dangerous" but "it's their decision". Risk, and its management, is a condition of a student's freedom and responsible decision-making. But, this is an example of a contrived or "artificially arranged […] form of the free" (Burchell, 1996, pp. 23) forming part of governmental technologies of the self. Mentors utilise an "apparatus of expertise" (Rose, 1996, pp. 155) to structure and reinforce the norms and expectations of course choices by introducing an element of risk in personal statements based on diverse choices. Mentors (in part) set the boundaries of the proper and improper, "the permitted and the forbidden" (*ibid*, pp. 153) to channel and shape students' choices along appropriate lines to meet the exigencies of personal statement writing and the needs of admissions tutors – "I want you to tell me why you want to do just my course'".

It is also worth noting, here, how students are not necessarily, or exclusively, encouraged to construct identities and self-articulations as prospective undergraduate students, but instead are

encouraged to *"focus on becoming a Nurse or a Midwife"* – highlighting the spectral presence of a career positioned as contingent on ones' HE choices. Invocations of 'being'/'be' or "becoming" also highlight two connected things. Firstly, the identity implications of these choices. It is not coincidental, in this discursive context, that education and work are successively positioned as the fundamental stages for being (*living*) and crucial sites for the development of self (*identity*). And, secondly, the seemingly necessary communication of a student's emergent academic-disciplinary socialisation as an apprentice scholar of specific disciplines of study. We shall return to these in more detail later.

5.3.2. *"Research, Research, Research!"*

"'I have no idea what I want to do/study' […] Well, start thinking! […] *Do research*!"
(James, Pastoral Mentor, FN2, pp. 9, *my emphasis*)

Linking up to the powerful imperative of consistent course choices, during early Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons prior to the formal introduction of personal statement writing, mentors instructed students to conduct in-depth research on the courses and institutions they wished to apply to. Mentors told students the purpose of this research was twofold: firstly, as James above alludes, to gain certainty about the courses they wanted to apply for to develop a singular focus; and secondly, to gather specific information about institutions and courses to identify the skills and/or characteristics presumed essential or desirable for that course and the 'ideal' student to "tailor" (IT1HW – BC/ME, pp. 23) their personal statements.

During the personal statement support workshop delivered by Carla she presented a slide entitled, "Research, Research, Research! Your stepping stones to University" (Carla, MMU representative, FN21, pp. 71) shown below in *Fig. 2.0*, sequentially outlining her rallying cry:

Fig. 2.0. Manchester Metropolitan University Personal Statement Workshop PowerPoint Slideshow, Slide 11 (FN21, pp. 71)

The above slide prescribes the "stepping stones" of HE-research, focusing firstly on "Academic entry requirements", then more specifically "course content", and finally "[o]ther entry requirements" which includes "personal skills, qualities and experiences". The visual metaphor of "stepping stones", I feel, is noteworthy in how it reinforces dominant assumptions about the determinism of choices and the increasing specificity and progressive focusing quality of research to become *more* certain. "Research" was positioned as the key to clarity and certainty, and consequently, to picking consistent courses.

The secondary purpose of research, as noted, was to construct knowledge about "course content" and "other entry criteria" attached to their choices. Christine, an A-Level Head of Studies, during the college's annual "Prestigious Universities" Parents Evening event said:

"...*the key message* that we are sharing with students at this time is [...] that in terms of preparing to apply for any university, and particularly the more prestigious universities and courses, we need to be encouraging students to be *on the case with their research now* [...] The other thing that I would say, and I think it's going to come up a couple of times in the presentation, and I think it's *so key* that from now: *students need to be researching* [...] their courses and making sure that they have all the necessary information that they need to know [...] *the research that you can put*

into your personal statement […] *building things up so there's plenty of good information to put in that personal statement.*" (FN28, pp. 122–125*, my emphasis*)

As Christine notes, "the *key* message" is "students need to be researching" to ensure "they have all the *necessary* information that they *need to know"*. As Christine puts it, the logical purpose of conducting research is "*building things up* so there's plenty of good information *to put in* that personal statement". In this way, Christine indicates how knowledge constructed through research are 'building blocks' ("building things up") to be used instrumentally in one's personal statement – "the research that you can *put into* your personal statement […] so there's plenty of good stuff *to put in* that personal statement". And, perhaps we can appreciate the discursive intertextuality of 'building blocks' and 'stepping stones', in these respects.

However, this concept and supposed purpose of research, I feel, exposes its contradiction; its competing rationalities. HE research, here, is couched on a double *a priori* which assumes a student who is certain about the courses they seek to apply to, and that their choices are "similar or the same" (FN3, pp. 23–24), to guide their information gathering. Therefore, paradoxically, certainty is both necessary starting point *and* objective of research.

In a telling example taken from Carla's personal statement workshop, we can see this paradoxical conceptualisation of certainty as a priori and objective. During the workshop, Janice (Student), a prospective Business Studies applicant, hesitantly asked Carla:

> Janice: "[pause] …mmmm, can you apply to two different courses at the same uni?"
> Carla: "Yeah, you can do, but you need a common theme within that so you need to be able to have a Business theme within those courses so we would avoid applying for something like Forensic Science and something like Film Making, even though someone might say they want to make crime films […] if you want to do something that comes out with professional accreditation like Law or Accountancy normally people will mainly apply for *just* accountancy, *but then, if you're not 100% sure*…"
> (FN21, pp. 85–86*, my emphasis*)

Firstly, Carla maintains the same strong disciplinary classifications here, as James did earlier in his "basket-weaving" comments. Importantly, we can see in Carla's final expression – "but then, *if you're not 100% sure*" – how the norm of consistent course choices is reinforced through questioning Janice's certainty where research becomes the natural remedy. Sally, a senior member of Student Services also in attendance, cited the example of a former student who deviated the norm of course choices, and how staff understood this:

> Sally: "We've had people last year and she applied for, she split her personal statement into two parts and the first bit was English and the second bit was, I think maybe, Sociology, and we we're like 'No, no, you can't send that off'."
> Carla: "Combined degrees?"
> Sally: "No, no, separate degrees; three English and two Sociology courses – and she got offers, and we just couldn't believe it 'cos we were like 'No, no, you can't do that, you know we always advise against it' but she did it and she got an offer […] *We were just questioning whether they were focused and whether they had done enough research on what they were applying for*" (FN21, pp. 86*, my emphasis*)

A number of phrases leap out from these extracts. Firstly, we have a clear example of how absurd the dominant advice on consistent course choices actually is. You shouldn't pick diverse course choices, because this is likely to jeopardise the success of your application but, then again, "she did it and *she got an offer"*.

The 'danger', as Carla alludes, highlighting risk, is that one's course choices powerfully reflect on the person making them – "we were just questioning *whether they were focused* and *whether they had done enough research* on what they were applying for" – echoing Maria's comments earlier. Sally's only means of understanding why a student would pick diverse courses was because had failed to conduct "*enough* research" meaning they were not "focused". Additionally, her inclusion of "enough" denotes a normative, minimum expectation regarding the amount of research required by students. In this sense, "*enough* research" relates to having gathered sufficient information to, not

so much become certain, but choose courses *appropriately*.

Here, we have an example of just how absurd the dominant advice is and how deviation and/or resistance to those dominant conventions, far from being 'risky' as it were, still proved successful making a mockery of the prescriptions themselves. As Sally says, the individual in question here "did it *and she got an offer*".

Though, it is worth noting that many of the students I spoke to, with regards to course choices, were simply not willing to entertain *the possibility* of risk that deviation (and resistance) supposedly carried. For students, it seems the stakes are so very high that it deviation wasn't 'worth it'. They are given messages, in various ways, about just how competitive and therefore, precarious, success in HE admissions is. So much so that the idea of deviating from the normative conventions and expectations is simply not one many are willing to consider for fear that *it may* backfire.

Later, during an interview with Janice, we briefly explored how she understood Carla's and Sally's advice during the personal statement workshop:

> R: I mean, what kinds of advice were you getting about the personal statement and
> course choices? …'cos I know at the MMU personal statement workshop they sort
> of said to you to make sure that your course choices were all pretty much the
> same…
> Janice: Yeah, yeah…
> R: …and to try to remove any ambiguity in that sense, and so you can make your
> personal statement more 'focused' and coherent.
> Janice: Yeah, afterwards when I talked to them, like, they said I could apply for
> whatever courses I wanted to, but they… they advised me not to.
> R: Right… was that a strong advising? Like a '*you can* but you *shouldn't*'?
> Janice: [laughs] Yeah, yeah, it felt like that... Like, if I was to do that, I would have to
> write two personal statements, but I don't know how that would work, so no, no…
> (IT1Janice – BC/ME, pp. 7)

I would like to raise a few points here. Firstly, in numerous conversations with Janice, I never felt any sense she was "not 100% sure" in her thinking about her HE intentions and what she would like to study – Business and Management. In fact, Janice appeared to have very strong, clear ideas about an area, a field of study, she would like to pursue in university. During the workshop, Janice also expressed some rather specific interests within these broad fields of study, such as Leadership, Finance and Accounting. However, she had been ever so subtly led to understand that this was a risky – a 'dangerous' – position. As she continued writing her personal statement attempting to reconcile (*what she had been told were*) her diverging interests with the normative advice, and in the process sought further help from other Student Services staff, she eventually came to recognise that she while *could* she *should not* have or pursue such 'divergent' interests. In the end, Janice was led by the invisible guiding hand/s of *Brook* staff and made to understand that to apply for such a 'diverse' range of courses while framed as a possibility, was actually, a practical impossibility. As with Maria before her, Janice was made to understand that, should she decide to attempt to write "two personal statements" this would reflect on her and potentially open her up to negative judgements. In short, she was made to recognise the inhering risk, the "danger" of trying to deviate the normative conventions of course choices and expectations of personal statement writing.

Later, during another interview I asked Janice again about this situation:

> R: …so, were there any other kinds of courses you were entertaining?
> Janice: No, not really, just business.
> R: Ok, just sort of variations on business and business management, and I think accounting was another one you mentioned?
> Janice: Yeah… I decided not to do that (IT2Janice – BC/ME, pp. 1)

Upon probing, what came to light (*as shown above*) was that Janice was actively dissuaded from applying for a wide range of courses despite her clearly articulated desires. However, as opposed to

be forcefully dissuaded in the form of an edict, she was responsibilised to come to this realisation *for herself* as a matter of her own risk management strategies; autonomized and governmentalized to adopt the appropriate conduct in line with the dominant discursive understandings and taking this as a matter of her own free will – "*I decided* not to do that".

At this point, before moving on, I would like to introduce something that will make this entirely confusing and confounding set of conventions, expectations and advice even more paradoxical – but perhaps, more understandable. James, after a Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson, commented to me "they all [*i.e. universities & admissions tutors*] know… they're all playing the game" (FN3, pp. 24). James, here, was telling me that there is a commonly held, but unspoken, understanding (among mentors at least) that all universities and their admissions tutors *know* that students apply for potentially 5 different courses at potentially 5 different institutions. Furthermore, he adds that each individual institution does not/cannot know which other courses or institutions a student has applied to but that such an understanding may be interpreted from a personal statement which implicated multiple areas of study. I shall return to explore this in more detail later, under section ***5.3.2.3.***.

At any rate, consistency of course choices achieved through research becomes a symbolic proxy of a student's focus and confidence – and we should note the polysemic intertextuality of the term 'focus' as both clarity of vision and strength of conviction. By contrast, diverse course choices show you lack focus and certainty because of failing to conduct "*enough* research". More research is better, more specific research is better still because, in this context, it means certainty, and certainty means singularity of mind and purpose reflecting one's confidence. In this sense, perhaps Christine's comment about "building things up" does not simply refer to gathering information to "tailor" one's personal statement, but also refers to 'building up' students' certainty and confidence in the form of homogenous course choices.

5.3.2.1. Doing your research and (not) using it: *Tailoring the personal statement*

As noted, an explicit purpose of conducting specific, in-depth research on institutions and course choices was to construct knowledge about "what they're looking for" (i.e. institutions and admissions tutors) in prospective students to "tailor" their personal statement. An A-Level Psychology Tutor, during a meeting of the 'Psychology Academy Group' (*an informal extra–curricular tutorial group related to exploring Psychology beyond the formal A-Level curriculum participation in which students frequently cited in their personal statements*), stated definitively:

> "Universities expect students to be informed, they expect them to understand what they're looking for." (FN23, pp. 102)

Understanding "what they're looking for" shows you are "informed"; which is an 'expectation' as this tutor notes. Knowing "what they're looking for" is presumptively demanded of students where this expectation is premised on the assumption of a student with a singular set of choices who has conducted "enough research" to be able to construct this understanding. Again, risk is introduced through an 'expectation'. In a similar sense as Maria's friends who inexplicably chose diverse A-Levels, students who fail to meet the 'expectation' of understanding "what they're looking for" invite risk in the form of character judgements as being uninformed, unprepared or, simply incapable of performing this interpretive feat. The task for students is to construct knowledge of "what they're looking for" and deploy this understanding tactically in their personal statement to show they measure up to the expectations of admissions tutors.

However, despite the prevailing wisdom of research, constructing an understanding of "what they're looking for" may be more like a high stakes guessing game indicative of the "rhetorical paradox" (Paley, 1996) in which students are positioned and asked to compose their personal statements.

5.3.2.2. *"What they're looking for"*: *Guessing games*

Firstly, of the literature available on personal statements in the context of educational selection, some have highlighted the "concealed agenda" (Keith–Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000, pp. 38) of admissions. Other analysts have described personal statements for admissions as a "mystified" (Ding, 2007, pp. 387) and "occluded genre in the academy" (Swales, 1996, pp. 45). Because of this, Brown (2004, pp. 243) notes, students "often feel themselves to be composing in a rhetorical void"; that is, composing self-articulations in an unfamiliar genre, for people they do not know nor will likely ever meet but who will judge them based on a set of largely uncertain or obscured, subjective criteria. Students will likely not have met too many admissions tutors and, as such, these people are an unknown, "invoked audience […] called up or imagined by the writer" (Ede & Lunsford, 1984, pp. 156) with uncertain evaluative criteria. Paley (1996) describes students' attempts to manage these hidden criteria and expectations as "rhetorical shadow boxing" (pp. 86).

Paley (*ibid*, pp. 100-101) also refers to the "Panopticon", highlighting a key implied characteristic of these invoked audiences as all-seeing and "omnipotent" (pp. 86). Admissions tutors, then, are cast as the all-powerful, 'expert' gatekeepers to university who judge student's self-constructions letting in only those who manage to construct "[*projections*] of the *right kind*" (*ibid,* pp. 90, *my emphasis*). And it is important to note that, in the first sense, mentors act as gatekeepers, implicitly deputised to work in concert with admissions tutors in communicating and judging students' understandings of "what they're looking for" in prospective undergraduates based on their self-articulations in the personal statement they later submit on students' behalves. Hayley (Pastoral Mentor), during interview, stated:

> "…we *know* what the admissions tutors are gonna wanna see […] *we're thinking like*
> *admissions tutors…*" (IT1HS – BC/ME, pp. 14)

Hayley's comments indicate an imbalance of power-knowledge between students and their mentors (and admissions tutors) who 'know' "what they're looking for" which immediately "puts the student in his or her place" (*ibid,* pp. 86). Mentors are 'experts' in this activity which cements students' passivity and dependence on external knowledge further reinforcing mentors' authority. This situation also cements students' powerlessness in determining the terms, requirements and conditions of their self-projections.

Secondly, much of the relevant literature on personal statements comes from the American context and on applications to professional and/or postgraduate programmes limiting their contextual-cultural relevance to undergraduate admissions in the UK. I came to this realisation after reading many articles from the US, which were, in crucial ways, highly contextually divergent to the UK and what I was seeing in my own data. For instance, with respect to Ding's (2007, pp. 387) description of the personal statements and their evaluative criteria as "mystified and occluded", building on the work of Swales (1996), I cannot fully agree. From observations and conversations, "what they're looking for", and how this should be written, may not be as "mystified and occluded" in the UK as elsewhere.

A cursory scan of UK university websites and prospectuses shows many now provide detailed guidance on how to compose a personal statement for that institution or a specific course, delineating the content they expect alongside the skills and experiences they desire in prospective students. For instance, I attended a University of Manchester (UoM) open day where a student ambassador directed me to a series of webpages specifying how to write an "effective personal statement" for UoM (http://www.umass.manchester.ac.uk/applying–to–university/ucas/) (FN43). As another example, Caroline, during an interview commented students should "go and focus on [...] *the person specification skills*" (ITxCaroline – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 203) listed in prospectuses and on institutional websites to understand "what they're looking for" and guide their writing.

Thus, "what they're looking for" does not appear to be as "mystified and occluded", as Swales (1996) and Ding (2007) argue, in the UK. Universities now, more than ever, prescriptively list what the desire in prospective students. An admissions officer in Paley's (1996, pp. 98) study referred to the personal statement, in this respect, as an "open book test" making failure to construct projections "of the right kind" (*ibid*, pp. 90) as a careless, personal failure.

Though, I must be somewhat modest here. Students I spoke with told me that even though they gathered lots of specific information about what to include in their personal statements from various 'official' sources, this information was often challenging to decipher, or would be met with scepticism. While the answers to the "test" (*ibid*) may be out there in places, it seems this is no guarantee of success.

During interview, I asked Ciara (Student):

> R: …do you think the personal statement is the most important part of the UCAS application?
> Ciara: I think… *it is* important, but I think it's sort of over–valued because like you have to tailor your personal statement to all of these universities but, like a lot of them, on their websites there'll be a tiny hint as to what they want, like I know Oxford and Cambridge want you to do an awful lot of extra reading, Leicester values work experience quite a bit, but Exeter was a little bit odd in that it told you exactly what it wanted and I feel like that's a bit of a, like they're trying to catch you out, like why are you telling me what I need to do 'cos no other university tells you what you *need* to do. They tell you exactly what extra–curriculars they want, they tell you what entry requirements would be with CREST, with an EPQ, with all these different things you can do and you're like, *why are you giving me this?...*
> R: Why do you think that would be a trap, or weird, or would be information to approach cautiously?
> Ciara: Because… [*deep exhale*] Cambridge, you can't even find out what exams you have to sit; they just say 'you just have extra exams to sit', but like 'How do I find the exams I wanna sit?', and Oxford just like says 'No exams' on the thing but I feel like I'm gonna get there and they'll be like, 'Oh, have you done this test, no? No chance' and then like, I don't know, you have to proper siphon information out to try and get

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even a hint of what they want from a candidate whereas Exeter have just told you straight up, 'This is what we're looking for!'. (IT1HW – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 23, *my emphasis*)

Ciara – and, highlighting the paradoxical challenge of 'tailoring' one's personal statement to different institutions or courses each with potentially different sets of "values" – underscores a peculiar position(ing). Firstly, she is frustrated by universities who do not state "what they're looking for" explicitly highlighting the inhering challenge of being able to "siphon information out" to *"get even a hint* of what they want". However, Ciara clearly had well-formed ideas about what each university was "looking for", evident in her articulations of what each "values". Though, curiously, she was sceptical about Exeter who tell you "straight up, 'This is what we're looking for!'". This, for her, was "odd" and felt "like they're trying to catch you out". Later in the same interview, Ciara linked the explicitness of what an institution is "looking for" to their "prestige" (*ibid*, pp. 27). Simply: if a university lists exactly "what they're looking for", then it can't be a very good university. For Ciara, the "catch" is that 'bad' universities *want* you more than you want them so, *tell you what they want*. Importantly, however, this situation highlights the essential complexity and ultimate uncertainty involved in constructing an idea of "what they're looking for" when even information 'from the horse's mouth' is treated dubiously, and when explicit information is often conflated with quality judgements about the institution.

Additionally, just because "what they're looking for" may be more explicit and visible does not mean students are able to harness this information unproblematically. Firstly, students must be able to balance the array of information they gather from a variety of sources which may be rivalrous presenting another interpretive balancing act within a balancing act.

Furthermore, a student may develop a strong idea of "what they're looking for", but how these self–articulations will be interpreted is another unpredictable matter. You might *think you know* "what they're looking for", but you *cannot know* how they will be received. Keith–Spiegel & Wiederman

(2000, pp. 209) state, to a large extent, students "do not have control over the images such information might conjure in the mind of evaluators". Brown (2004, pp. 244) shrewdly describes this "caveat scriptor" – 'writer beware' – highlighting students' responsibilisation for the appropriateness of their self-articulations based on ideas about how they will be interpreted. Of course, it is epistemologically impossible to know how their performances will be read yet they are responsibilised for both what they say, how they say it *and* the possible 'images' these may elicit in an unknown audience.

The idea of "what they're looking for", to me, also indicates a powerful notion of the 'right' student. Students are encouraged to write freely and personally, yet this invitation comes from unknown gatekeepers who will judge their self-constructions based on ideas of the 'right' candidate. In this way, there must be some trade–off between the 'actual' person students are and the 'ideal' type, to use a Weberian term, they are required to be. Paley (1996) further notes:

> "Given the demands implicit in the task environment – demands for mechanically correct and "confessionally revealing prose" – it is a wonder that so many students successfully complete the task. The ones that do succeed seem to be able to compromise with a kind of rhetorical counterparadox." (pp. 101)

In this "rhetorical counterparadox", Paley (*ibid*) describes strategies and tactics students engage in to construct a balance between 'authentic' self–presentations and powerfully conditioned understandings that those self–(re)presentations be "of the right kind" (pp. 90). Students' responsibility is to perform themselves as "the right kind" (*ibid,* pp. 90) of student they are expected to be. The overriding imperative, then, is not to be yourself, necessarily but to be "what they're looking for".

To me, students' attempts to inscribe themselves in a personal statement based on the guessing– game of "what they're looking for" represent forms of performative "enactment[s]" (Butler, 1990). Students enact their understanding of "what they're looking for" in attempts at "fulfilling the needs"

(Keith–Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000, pp. 38) of admissions tutors highlighting its performative

element. They are required to be *certain kinds of subjects* for these people, highlighting a necessary

governmentalization of subjectivity and reshaping of identity.

5.3.2.3. 'Alienation': *Getting it wrong by getting it (too) right*

While students were encouraged to conduct focused research to construct knowledge of "what

they're looking for" to "tailor" their personal statements, they would be unwise to follow this advice

too closely or slavishly. In a telling comment, Jason, a Head of A-Level Studies, commented on the

presumed differentiation of courses, even those with the same name:

> "…say, for example, different history courses […] if one university has lecturers who
> are interested in medieval poetry say, then that's probably going to make up a lot of
> the course, whereas in another uni they could be interested in, Stalin, or something,
> so that'll be different to the other history course." (FN1, pp. 3)

Here Jason constructs the UK system of HE as highly differentiated. The paradox of *specific–general*

comes into sharp focus here. Student's must choose "ideally the same" courses – for example,

"History" – to be able to focus specifically on the requirements of a prospective History student

across institutions. But, not all History courses are the same underlining the inhering complexity of

choosing "the same" courses. Students must focus specifically on "History", but it would be

detrimental to focus too specifically on elements of one History course such as, "medieval poetry" or

"Stalin". In this way, Jason alerts students to the high degree of variation between courses of the

same name, and by virtue, then, also in "what they're looking for".

The case of Penny, who got it spectacularly wrong by getting it *too right*, is illuminative. Penny,

following the dominant advice of her mentor, conducted in–depth research on her course of choice,

Psychology at Leeds Beckett. In doing so, she identified academic staff attached to the

undergraduate Psychology programme and found a variety of their research publications. In the

personal statement draft she gave to James, Penny had cited a quote from one of these scholarly papers to demonstrate her passionate interest in a specific area of Psychology the department's researchers specialised in. While James was generally commendatory of Penny's obvious single minded 'focus' and research, she was told to remove the quote and all other references to Psychology at Leeds Beckett University. James's feedback was, Penny was being "too specific" (James, FN3, pp. 25). Visibly confused and frustrated by this comment, Penny was advised to re–draft her personal statement avoiding explicit references to Psychology at Leeds Beckett despite her clear convictions. The summative feedback she received was 'be more general'. Penny, it seems, got it wrong by getting it *too* right.

Maria (student) astutely stated during an interview:

> Maria: "It [*i.e. personal statement*] has to be specific, like each university, each has their own kind of what they want, but then it also has to be really general because you can only write one personal statement […] you have to balance it out" (IT1MV – BC/ME, pp. 17)

As can be appreciated, both specificity and generality are, simultaneously, things to be tactically and strategically harnessed and avoided – "*you have to balance it out*" – something Penny did not do. We can see just how contradictory advice regarding course choices and research are, and how precarious the tightrope of personal statement writing is, when being *too* specific is highly problematic.

Hayley (Pastoral Mentor) commented during interview about specific references to courses or institutions, stating:

> Hayley: "[*by "tailoring" a personal statement*] it shows they've researched into the courses *[…] but then you can never let them indicate what unis they've applied for*, 'cos, well, you can't mention the university can you? […] you can't; you just can't show preference, but… I mean, some of them do show preference. It depends how they word it, doesn't it?" (IT2HS – BC/ME, pp. 11–12)

You *should* tailor your personal statement because this shows you are well "researched", but you can't "show preference"; though, you can and probably should, just not directly; it all "depends on how they word it". Be specific, but not too much, and remember to be general, but not too much. A Goldilocks dilemma. Students are progressively informed during Pastoral Tutor Group lessons and one–to–one meetings that the highly-specific information they have been encouraged to laboriously gather through their research must *not* be used directly, but rather used in a non-specific, indirect way. Be specific, but not too much, and remember to be general, but not too much. However, Hayley above indicates how students can manage this balancing act through strategic approaches to writing – "*it depends how they word it*".

As an example, below is feedback given to Carys (student) during a one–to–one meeting about, strategically, 'how to word it' to hide the fact she was applying for 'diverse' courses and make sure she wasn't showing preference:

> Caroline: "…and then it's just with some of your courses, you're doing English Literature and Sociology, and then there's the odd one of Creative Writing, I would just try and make Sociology a bit more prominent in your personal statement, just for the fact that I know obviously, you mentioned about '1984' there which obviously has the sociological aspect to it […] but I'd maybe make it a little more. I just know […] it's difficult especially when you've got the English and Creative Writing as well, 'cos like American Literature and Sociology, that's fine but I wouldn't specifically talk about either, 'cos you've got those two aspects, mainly talk about you having English Literature I would *maybe* put Sociology forwards a bit more in this opening bit and you can do that through talking about '1984', ok, makes sense?" (FN25, pp. 111*, emphasis in original*)

Again, the incompatibility thesis underpinning the discourse of course choices is evident – "with those subjects, I know it's difficult especially when you've got the ones that are English and Creative Writing as well [*as*] American Literature and Sociology".

Another of Caroline's students, Paul, wanted to apply for courses in Business, Politics, Finance and Accounting posing a problem for 'how to word it' in terms of being suitably specific and general. During a one–to–one meeting, Caroline noted Paul's personal statement lacked focus due to the diversity of his choices and advised him on changes that needed to be made, saying:

> Caroline: "…ok, we'll hold off on that until you've made a final decision [*about which course to apply for*], but you may need to reword it so that it's not obvious [*you're applying for a diverse range of courses*]" (FN4, pp. 33)

Clearly, "how they word it", or 'rewording', speaks to the presence of linguistic/narrative performative strategy in writing personal statements. These strategies result from the compounding 'gaps' between specific course choices and equally specific ideas of "what they're looking for". Students, if they do, need to make sure "it's not obvious" they are applying for different courses at different institutions by tactically and strategically structuring their writing to be 'all things to all people'.

Carla, at the end of her workshop, expressed the 'danger' in referring to specific courses or institutions using an unusual expression:

> Carla: "you have to make sure what you say is appropriate to all of your choices, so your one personal statement goes to up to a maximum of your 5, maybe different universities, *so if you talk loads about doing this particular course at Warwick you may alienate your other university choices, so its keeping it general and that it also applies to*…"
> Sally*:* "So you would never recommend mentioning a specific university?"
> Carla: "...I think it's more that if you just talk loads about their course then you know*, that can alienate some of your other choices 'cos then that'll make them think 'Oh, well, they really don't wanna come here*…" (FN21, pp. 82, *my emphasis*)

The opening sentiment – "make sure what you say is appropriate to all of your choices" – lends credence to the idea balance in the personal statement which must be 'all things to all people'. Importantly, references to specific courses or institutions could "alienate" other courses and

institutions. However, perhaps more shrewdly interpreted, students may actually "alienate" themselves by not playing the game 'properly'; as they are expected to.

However most illuminative here, I feel, is Carla's implication of what happens if you are *too specific*. The perceptual implication could mean, for other institutions: "'Oh, well, they really *don't* wanna come here". Again, and again, the competing imperatives underpinning these types of advice are clearly evident. In this sense, Hayley commented:

> Hayley: "it's difficult, it's a difficult task […] they *should* be aiming their statement towards what they think is their firm choice really, but then you don't want to alienate the other choices […] [*it's a*] risk to be honest […] But then, for those it applies to they're like 'Oh, they're perfect for us then'" (IT2HS – BC/ME, pp. 12, *emphasis in orginal*)

You "*should* be aiming" your statement towards your "firm choice", but this is potentially both risky and rewarding. Through certain specificities, students could demonstrate they 'really wanna come here' and show themselves as being "perfect" for one course, but which at the same time, "alienate[s]" others. Yet being too general means you are not targeting anyone and are missing a crucial *opportunity* which, as Aharoni (1981, IN: O'Malley, 1996) argues, is a contingent, emergent condition of individualised risk.

In closing this section, below are two illustrative examples of strategic approaches to 'how to word it' to avoid alienation and harness tactical ambiguity by balancing specificity and generality:

1. Rob's Personal Statement:

Rob wanted to apply to Politics and History courses. Below is an excerpt from Rob's second draft, followed by his mentor, Caroline's, formative feedback, subsequently followed by Rob's third re–submitted draft incorporating this feedback.

Rob, **_Personal Statement 2nd Draft_**: "<u>I believe I am right for a Politics or History and Politics degree</u>, because I am a focused, highly academic and conscientious student. I am ready to be pushed to the highest level and I have significant interest in those subject areas."

Caroline, **comment**: "I suggest you put 'this degree', unless all of the courses have the same title."

Rob, **_Personal Statement 3rd Draft_**: "I am committed to work outside of class time and am excited to carry on my efforts in extra–curricular activities at university.

I want to open my mind to not only the politics of this country today, but also politics on a global and historical level, *which I believe makes me right for this degree*."

(MSA1:PS/RM –BC/ME, pp. 43–44)

What we have here is an extremely basic editorial tactic. "I believe I am right for *a Politics or History and Politics degree*" is tactically modified to the more generalised, "I believe makes me right for *this degree*". Rob tempered specificity through tactical ambiguity to avoid alienation. "*[T]his degree*" is capable of being read as both specific and general; and it is assumed all audiences would read this as '*our degree*'.

2. <u>Edward's Personal Statement:</u>

Edward wanted to apply to a variety of Psychology courses. What is intriguing about Edward's example is not the addition/removal of specificity/generality *per se*, but more in the see–sawing between these poles relative to both course and institution as he tries to find the 'right way' based on his mentor's advice. As before, feedback and changes are denoted by underlining and italicising respectively:

2nd draft		3rd draft		4th draft		5th draft
						(**ES**: "UCAS draft")
Edward: "These key skills which I have learnt from studying maths can definitely aid my understanding of the statistical side <u>of the psychology degree</u>"	→	Edward*:* "These key skills which I have learnt can definitely aid my understanding of the statistical side *of this degree*"	→	Edward: "<u>The Psychology course at your university</u> will aid me in many different areas of what I encounter next in life"	→	Edward: "I feel *that a Psychology degree taught at such a prestigious higher education institute* will provide me with the further knowledge needed to attain my passion to reveal new discoveries to improve lives for the better."

(MSA1:PS/ES –BC/ME, pp. 2–6)

As with Rob above, Edward has strategically replaced the more specific "*the psychology degree*" with the more ambiguous "*this degree*" to the same ends. Furthermore, the specific phrase "*the* psychology course at *your* university" is amended with a somewhat sycophantic ambiguity becoming "*a* Psychology degree taught at such a *prestigious higher education institute*". As with Rob, it would seem reasonable to assume an individual admissions tutor could/would read this as – 'this prestigious education institute *of mine*'.

And, finally, returning to James' comments earlier – "*they're all playing the game*" – perhaps we can re-read and interpret this statement in a new light relative to notions of consistent course choices, alienation alongside editorial strategies and tactics about 'how to word it'. We could argue that, as opposed to these conventions and associated normative advice supporting the dominant conceptualisations, mentors and students are also "playing the game"; maybe just in a different way, to different ends. The strategic and tactical practice of wording ones' personal statements in such a way so as to 'hide' or obscure diverse course choices or interests, for example, could be understood as a minor form of subversion and resistance to the dominant conventions and expectations that

they *must have* singular interests, consistent course choices and 'target' their personal statements to one course in one institution; that they must *be 'one thing'.* Clearly, students and mentors both follow *and* deviate the conventions and expectations in this respect. They do this by both satisfying the conventions of personal statement writing while also creatively and purposefully evading them, subverting the norm that they have singular course choices through various textual strategies. Thus, we could perhaps argue that mentors and students, in efforts to 'word' their personal statements in deliberately strategic, obfuscatory ways, are implicitly and subtly challenging a set of discourses and systems that essentially render them powerless by dictating, firstly, the terms, conditions and appropriate forms for their self-presentations and, secondly, the normative 'rules' for who and what may be valid, appropriate and acceptable. Students, as such, evade the demands placed on them by creatively but only tacitly satisfying them, thus shifting the dynamics of power back in their favour as they 'game' the 'game' as it were. Saltmarsh's (2004) discursive analysis of plagiarism in HE notes a similar situation with regards to incidences of plagiarism in academic intellectual productions among HE students given their experiences and subjectivities as 'consumers' in the neoliberal, performative space of contemporary HE. I shall return to explore this interesting idea in more detail later under section ***6.3.1.4.***.

5.4. 'Concluding' remarks:

Students are immersed in a web of contradictory messages and practical advice leading to a great deal of confusion, which if they are to be successful personal statement writers, they must find balance: Choose whichever courses you like, but make sure these are all the same, and be mindful that the same, is never the same; Do (enough) research, but don't use this knowledge directly; Be specific and "tailor" your personal statement, but not too much; be what "they're looking for" but be yourself. Students must walk a precarious tightrope that takes both competing ideas seriously yet focus on neither. What is required is an approach that is specific *enough* to 'aim' at a single course and demonstrate your confidence and certainty, yet general enough to be 'all things to all people'.

6.3. Skills & The Personal Statement*: (more of) *"What they're looking for"*

Beyond satisfying academic entry requirements, there lies another field of expectations of, and specifications for, prospective undergraduate students – the "other stuff" (FN12.1, pp. 3) as the Principal of *Brook College* termed it, or "extra things" (FN12, pp. 45) by a member of Student Services staff. Borrowing again from Carla's slide "Research, Research, Research!" (*Fig. 2.0*), this involves "personal skills, qualities and experiences" (FN21, pp. 71).

Moving beyond "what they're looking for" further, in the following section of analysis I examine how students are taught and form understandings of how they are expected to speak in their personal statements through the language of skills, how they are taught the conventional structure, style and form of personal statements, and, how students must perform themselves through "skills talk" (Bridges, 1993, pp. 43). I explore these ideas under three interpretive themes.

The first – *Learning the "lingo"* – explores how students learn the (*new*) language of skills they are required to speak in their personal statements. In various ways, students are understood through numerous assumed deficits relative to both knowledge of, and experience using, this essential lingua franca. Students, initially at least, do not know the appropriate ways to understand their education and speak themselves in terms of skills, so their mature, 'expert' mentors must teach them. Acquisition and mastery of this genre-specific language is considered as an *"essential cultural qualification"* (Beck, 1992, pp. 76, *emphasis in original*) not simply for education, but life in the "real world".

The second – *Learning the (t)ropes* – explores a range of interventionist pedagogical strategies used by mentors to teach students how to put the language of skills in use in the 'correct' ways to produce a 'good' personal statement following dominant conventions. Mentors utilise a wide range of writing resources, such as models, writing frames and frameworks, to support students' production of a 'good' personal statement. Through these correctively structuring pedagogical resources, students are not simply taught the proper ways to structure their writing but, more

profoundly, are offered a contrived form of originality and individuality under the guise of a *personal statement*.

The final theme – *Learning to perform* – argues the deployment of a language/discourse of skills, in this context, can be understood in terms of implied academic disciplinary discourses and socialisation into prospective academic discourse communities related to students' chosen courses. I argue that "skills talk" (Bridges, 1993, pp. 43) represents a set of floating signifiers capable of speaking uniformly to each and all depending on the academic-disciplinary context in which they are situated, discussed and the audiences they serve. The 'key' for students lies in crafting desirable performances of their suitability and capability for certain undergraduate courses, and demonstrate their emergent academic-disciplinary socialisation, through talk of "relevant" skills. Students must communicate their capability and suitability, or *fit*, with a given course or discipline of. Their job is to *be*, or more accurately, perform themselves as the 'right' candidate they are meant/expected to be. Then, in closing, I explore the over-arching imperative of personal statement writing replete across information, advice and guidance provided to students – *"standing out from the crowd"*.

6.2. Learning the "lingo"

6.2.1. Deficit Assumptions

Shuker (2014), drawing on Bernstein's (2000) work in her study of 'personal branding' strategies in personal statement writing, notes how students at a large FE (*Further Education*) college were positioned "as learners with various kinds of deficit" (pp. 236). Shuker (*ibid*) argues this conceptualisation led to college staff discharging their roles in HE support, particularly related to personal statements, with more of a "key-skills function" (pp. 237). Through such deficit positioning, Shuker (*ibid*) notes, students were conceived in a passive role in the pedagogical relationship, and consequently, were thought to require more direct interventions in developing aspects of their 'key-skills' – specifically, their "self-marketing skills" (pp. 236) – in personal statements.

In much the same way, mentors constructed a legitimate entry for corrective pedagogical interventions in personal statement writing through assumed deficits in students' writing skills. Mentors consistently bemoaned students' first drafts understanding these in terms of technical deficits in literacy often refracted through subject-specific stereotypes based on dominant disciplinary discourses of textual production in the Arts and Humanities compared to the Sciences. Students of the former disciplines were unanimously considered more competent writers though neither were considered 'good' personal statement writers as the following extracts show:

> Caroline: "...'cos I think the personal statement, in a lot of ways, students unless they do languages, or like a student does English literature or something like that and they're really good at writing, then they're not necessarily going to produce a good piece of writing, a good personal statement" (FN25 – BC/ME, pp. 117)

> Hayley: "Students who don't do literacy-based subjects would struggle [...] they really struggle writing paragraphs, sentences, describing [...] they really struggled with it [*i.e. writing personal statements*]" (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 20)

However, these deficit assumptions, I believe, refer more the possession a *specific form* of literacy, i.e. the context- and genre-specific "language of skills" (Bridges, 1993, pp. 44) required for personal statements.

Following several students' through successive rounds of drafting, I discovered a major issue cited by mentors in feedback was under-reference to skills. Below is a selection of extracts from a small corpus of personal statements I followed through the entirety of the drafting-feedback-redrafting process, including formative feedback from their mentors, which highlight the necessity but initial absence of skills:

> [Edward, *Student*:] "The psychology department took some psychology Students on a trip to the monkey forest […] which gave me insight of the different types of behaviours which the monkeys display to each other such as predatory behaviours, it also allowed me to examine the different types of facial expressions which the monkeys produce and how the differ from human facial expressions."
> [Caroline, Pastoral Mentor – comment:] "*Focus on the skills you have gained from this*"
>
> [Edward, *Student***:**] "*These key skills* which I have learnt from studying maths can definitely aid my understanding of the statistical side of the psychology degree. Business is the final a-level I have studied, this has given me the skill of essay writing which will heighten my skills needed in psychology experimental write ups and also it has given me a wider outlook on the world and how psychology can be used in the world of business as well as other environments"
> [Caroline, *Mentor* – comment:] "*Focus on the skills you have gained from this*"
>
>
> [Caroline, *Mentor* – summative comment/end:] "A decent start Edward. *You need to focus more on the skills that you have gained from your subjects and work experience*. Fab effort."
> (MSA1:PS/**ES** -BC/ME, pp. 1-8, *my emphasis*)
> _____
>
> [Jane, *Student, 1ˢᵗ draft*:] "Aside from my study of further maths; biology and philosophy have also helped cultivate my interest in maths. […] In philosophy, I got

to discuss with my teacher outside of the curriculum about the nature of mathematics itself and he is assisting me with an essay on the nature of beauty, where I hope to include the contribution mathematics has made with "equations of beauty" and what this can say about aesthetics. This discussion of mathematics has helped me to critically assess the subject area I wish to go into as well as gain an insight into topics outside the curriculum."

[Caroline, Pastoral Mentor – comment:] "*What other skills have you gained from this?*"

[Jane*, Student*, *2nd draft:*] "I think that my study of philosophy, along with biology, has given me the *critical thinking abilities* to be able to make a more informed decision on these topics in the future, *through the skills I gained through essay writing and an ability to think more analytically*"

[Caroline, Pastoral Mentor – comment:] "*Good*"

(MSA1:PS/*JB* -BC/ME, pp. 8-18, *my emphasis*)

[Marianna, Student:] "Currently I am looking to gain experience in the industry, as my main experiences have been learning in the classroom, doing my own personal reading and research and also spectating trials at Manchester Court."

[Caroline*,* Pastoral Mentor – summative comment/end:] "A decent start Marianna. Please see my above comments, also *you need to discuss the skills* you have gained from activities outside of college. A good effort."

(MSA1:PS/*MP* -BC/ME, pp. 18-24, *my emphasis*)

[Jack, *Student*:] "In conclusion, I am a perfect candidate for this course due to my physical science and mathematics knowledge, my determination to exceed in Computer Science and make a career out of it, and my ability to quickly learn new things, especially when I enjoy them. Above all else, however, is how much I adore programming and learning about the inner workings of computer systems, especially as they are such a huge part of everyday life now. New developments in digital technology excite me, and I hope to play my part in new developments in the near future."

[Caroline, Pastoral Mentor – summative comment/end:] "A decent start *JN*. If you are applying for Oxbridge you need to demonstrate your interest in the subject

beyond the syllabus. What have you done outside of college related to this subject? Things to consider adding:

- *What skills have you gained from your subjects?*
- Have you completed any further reading/projects?
- *What skills have you gained from your voluntary work?*
- What modules are you interested in studying further?

Well done ☺"

(MSA1:PS/*JN* -BC/ME, pp. 24-35, *my emphasis*)

In another example, in Marianna's first submitted draft (*above: extract 3*), she produced an introductory paragraph then signalled her uncertainty about how to proceed stating: "(UNSURE WHAT TO WRITE YET FOR THE ABOVE)":

> "It is through Geology that I have learnt the importance of personal research, giving me the confidence to continue my studies in depth outside of an educational environment, and enjoy the success independent work can bring, as well as proving to be a useful tool in the development if my self-discipline and strong work ethic.
>
> History has helped me… *develop analytical skills?? Helped with written [sic] word, in the form of analytical essays*
>
> Philosophy has… *to work within a team, helping me to develop my interpersonal skills […] ?*
>
> Through studying Law I have found my passion as well as…. *any theorists or cases I've studied that have been particularly influential, before going on to say what else I have gained from law and why it has made me want to continue studying it at a higher level*
>
> (UNSURE YET WHAT TO WRITE FOR THE ABOVE)" (MSA1:PS/*MP* -BC/ME, pp. 21-23, *my emphasis*)

What I hope is appreciable from Marianna's reflexive style is that, while she may be "UNSURE YET *WHAT* TO WRITE", she does possess ideas about *how* she is expected to write. Marianna seems aware that any writing, whether on "History", "Philosophy", "Law" or extra-curricular activities, must

be framed in terms of skills – *"develop my analytical skills?"*; *"helped with written word"*; *"develop my interpersonal skills*?" – also implied by her suggestions of activities she could use to discuss her skills. Marianna's hesitations seem to stem from a powerful idea about the 'right way' she is required to speak. In this sense, her questions appear to indicate she is not totally "UNSURE". Inclusion of "YET" perhaps also indicates her pedagogical passivity and dependence on Caroline's expertise in this respect.

As can be seen from these extracts, a significant problematisation transformed into the focus of formative/corrective feedback in initial drafts was a lack of skills talk.

6.2.2. *"You learn to take it all in"* (FN39, pp. 20)

Because mentors initially took students to be unaware of the importance and necessity to speak (themselves) in terms of skills, many attempted to "get out ahead" (Laura, Pastoral Mentor, FN39, pp. 157) of these issues before first drafts. As such, large portions of early Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons were devoted to teaching the accepted structure and content of a personal statement, foregrounding especially, the central position of skills. Caroline (Pastoral Mentor) commented:

> Caroline*:* "In terms of what we do with them in the first year; basically they come back after study leave, and they have about three weeks at college before they finish for the summer and in those three weeks […] *we have to basically get through 'right, this is how you write a personal statement'* […] [*we*] *get them thinking about, what are the skills they have in their subjects and what do they do outside* […] and *it's actually getting them to think* […] '*right, this is how you write a personal statement; this is what you have to put in, now think about what skills you've got in life…'*" (Caroline*,* FN25, pp. 116*, my emphasis*)

"'[T]his is how you write a personal statement; this is what you have to put in… what *skills you've got*" – no more neatly does an expression demonstrate the pre-eminent position skills occupy in personal statement writing. Later in the same discussion, Caroline alluded to specific deficiencies

related to students' recognition and understanding of themselves and their education in terms of skills, necessitating strategies for 'getting out ahead':

> Caroline: "*they're going to be like, 'I don't have any skills, I don't know'*… […] tutor says 'right, we're going to start working on your personal statement, I know *it's really, really early but we're going to get you to start thinking about your skills*'" (Caroline, FN25, pp. 116, *my emphasis*)

During interview, Caroline commented:

> Caroline: "a lot of them struggle to big themselves up […] they probably don't know how to, or maybe don't necessarily think that some of the things they do - *like the skills they've gained in their subjects* - they don't actually realise that these are actually really, really good things that they do. So, like in Psychology, critical analysis skills, like they don't realise that evaluating a study or analysing a different point of view, positives and negatives […] they don't actually realise that it's a skill, they just think it's like, average…" (ITxCaroline – BC/ME, pp. 207, *my emphasis*)

Drawing on her professional experiences of students' "struggle[s]", Caroline goes on to say:

> Caroline: "…*a lot of them struggle with the skills in their own subjects* because they, they just don't necessarily, *they aren't necessarily aware*." (ITxCaroline – BC/ME, pp. 210-213, *my emphasis*)

We can appreciate how students are formed on numerous assumed deficits *vis a vis* skills. Students "struggle with […] skills"; they "aren't necessarily aware"; they "don't realise". The dominant understanding is that students are unable to identify the skills they are assumed to have acquired from their studies and "what they do outside" college. However, these are externally imposed judgements emerging from the imposition of a new discursive 'frame'; judgements which legitimate increased corrective instruction and cement students position of dependence on mentors' expertise.

Students "don't know", "struggle with the skills in their own subjects" and "aren't necessarily aware" because they are confronted with 'new' ways they are required to speak, and more profoundly, 'new'

ways they are required to understand themselves and their education in terms of what they have made of/from these activities. We can see this startlingly overt invitation to instrumentality in the pattern of formative feedback comments cited in the previous section – "Focus on the skills you have gained from this"; "what skills have you gained from your subjects?"; "what skills has this given you?". This 'new' subjectivity, and the mode of speaking it demands, is (initially) alien to students. Students "aren't necessarily aware" because this is a 'new' externally imposed way of understanding and speaking oneself. Students must adopt this subjectivity and master this specific and essential form of educational (self-)literacy quickly to be successful personal statement writers.

Sophie (*student*), while discussing initial challenges and confusions about knowing what to say and, importantly, how to say it, noted:

> Sophie: "Well, you learn, 'cos the teachers give you a lot of handouts and *you eventually get to know the lingo* [laughs]…" (IT1SD – LJMU - BC/ME, pp. 201, *my emphasis*)

Sophie's comment "you eventually get to know the lingo" perhaps speaks to this idea of a requisite language – *the language of skills* – students must quickly learn to become successful personal statement writers.

Hayley (*Pastoral Mentor*) described her use of first and final drafts from previous students' personal statements as comparative exemplars in modelling activities to "get out ahead" of teaching students the correct "lingo". Early in the drafting process, Hayley showed her students a 'first draft' and a successful 'final' draft indicating both the 'right' product and, implicitly, the 'right' way to produce one. During interview Hayley commented:

> Hayley: "Well, actually, this year, when I mentioned about the standard being higher, I've not had that problem [*of literacy*] at all, the ones I've had this year have been very good; they struggled with it [*initially*] […] but *this year*, I've not had that much of a problem with [*literacy*] to be honest, but then they've had more examples

to look at as well, and refer to, you know, the way they've been written, that has helped them I think.

R: I think in our last interview you had mentioned something new you had been doing; you had shown them first drafts and…

Hayley*:* And final drafts.

R: … and final drafts, yeah, and then, when they have those two they can refer to and they can see, 'how do you get from that one to that one'?

Hayley*:* Yeah, that's it. *Like showing them the final drafts has really helped, like the language they're using and the way they're writing them is more skilled, it just looks better, it's just… better* […] [*and*] when we looked at those first drafts, they aren't as good as the first drafts I've had [*this year*] which shows it worked as a task […] they knew what they shouldn't really be working at for first drafts […] they definitely learned from it" (IT1Hayley – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 19-21, *my emphasis*)

As Hayley alludes, underlying her practices is the idea of a "standard" implying a dominant norm indicative of the 'right' way. By showing students a 'final' draft they are shown "the way they've been written" and made to understand their present lack of prosaic/linguistic competence. For Hayley*,* the learning that took place hinged on alerting students to "what they *shouldn't really* be working at" as an avoidance goal. The activity "worked as a task […] they definitely learned from it" and Hayley judges this through "*the language they're using* and *the way they're writing them*"; ironically and accurately described as "more skilled". Here, Hayley through using first and final drafts, 'models' the 'right' way.

When faced with a new discursive system and linguistic register in which they must labour, and a new subjectivity they are required to adopt to appropriately understand and speak themselves in these ways, students justifiably 'struggle' and face significant challenges. After all, this is not necessarily the way they speak nor how they routinely understand themselves or their education.

During an 'Oxbridge Applicant Day' I spoke to Neil. While discussing the competing pressures to "fit them [*i.e. skills*] all in" (FN15, pp. 52) and the need to "sound smart" (FN15, pp. 52), Neil paused in exasperation saying:

Neil: *"It's so difficult to sound like yourself […] I don't talk like this, you know?! [laughs]"*
(FN15, pp. 52-53, *emphasis in original*)

"[S]kills talk" may not be the way Neil normally talks about or understands himself or his education, but this *is* how he must understand his education and speak himself in the personal statement. The difficulty of 'sounding like yourself' perhaps speaks to the newly imposed subjectivity Neil struggles to assimilate while still trying to retain an 'authentic' sense of self.

6.2.3. Recruitment is the best teacher

For mentors, students not knowing how to identify and talk about their skills was, in part, understood as symptomatic of their assumed lack of experience in recruitment, particularly writing job applications and CVs, where self-commodification and self-marketing in the form of skills-talk, are considered essential (Shuker, 2014; Harvey, *et al.,* 2002).

What is key to note in this section are the weak classificatory boundaries constructed between a personal statement and a CV, and between education and employment, set within the strong frame of (employability) skills which permit a transferability of discourses, practices and purposes – but, which also engenders some confusion.

Fundamentally, I think it's telling how (*in*)experience in recruitment is understood as a mirror of a student's (*in*)ability to speak and understand themselves in the correct ways in personal statements for HE selection. Elaborating an extract from Caroline cited earlier, we can appreciate this:

> "…*a lot of them struggle to big themselves up*, like I struggle to do it; I remember
> when I was writing job applications like 'I am really fun' or 'I'm really good at' and
> it's just because you're not necessarily used to it and a lot of them aren't…"
> (ITxCaroline – BC/ME, pp. 207, *my emphasis*)

At interview, Caroline made passing reference to a previous college-wide "Teaching & Learning Theme", in part, geared towards "employability". As part of this initiative, students received an "employability booklet" delineating per subject what skills they were assumed to acquire/develop and were encouraged to use this information when writing personal statements, CVs and job applications. Vestiges of this initiative were still evident around the college. For instance, outside one Languages classroom sat a large display entitled "Employability Skills in the School of Modern Foreign Languages", shown below in *Fig. 3.0.*:
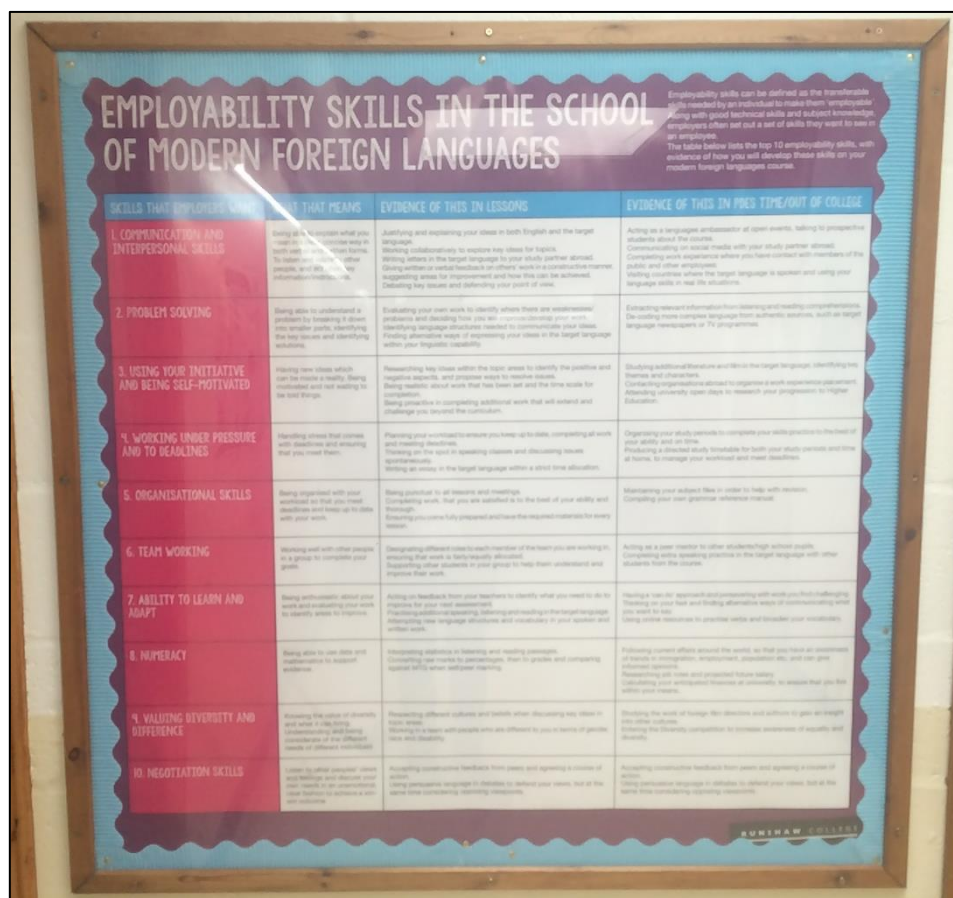
Fig 3.0. "Employability Skills in the School of Modern Foreign Languages" poster (P52-BC ME)

From left to right the columns are titled, "Skills that employers want", "What that means", "Evidence of this in lessons" and "Evidence of this in PDES time/out of college" (***N.B. "PDES" refers to 'Personal/Professional Development and Educational Services"***) – and, in this, we can appreciate how

education is inflected with an the instrumental character through the discourse of skills. Another example of one of the college's many 'skills' displays can be seen below in *Fig. 4.0.* and *4.1.*:

Fig. 4.0. Permanent "Employability" Display – "What skills are employers looking for?" and "How can I demonstrate employability skills?" (P84 - LJMU – BC/ME)
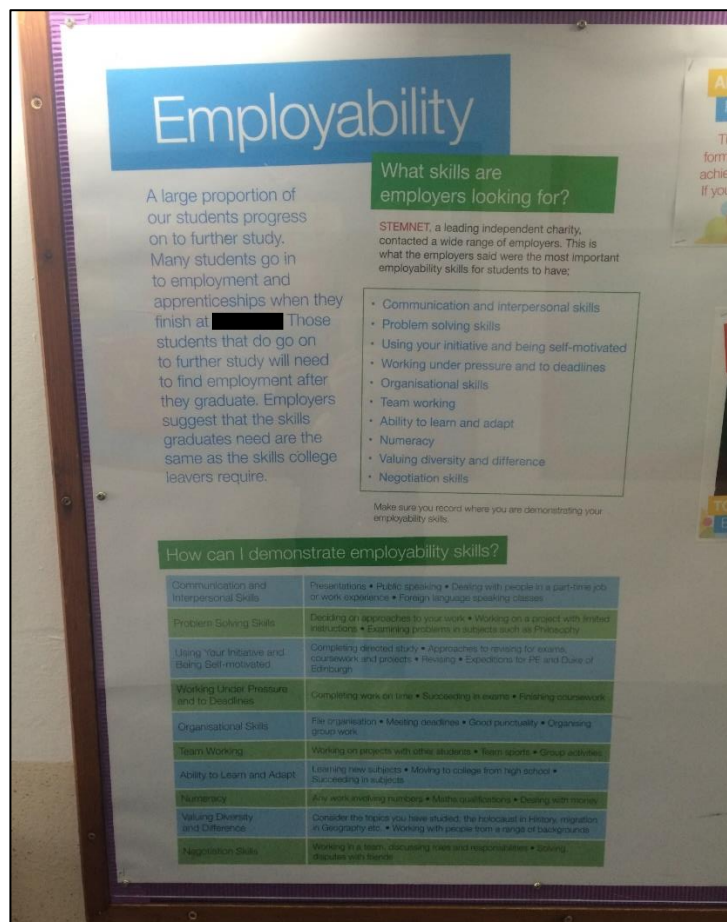
Fig. 4.1. Close up (left) – Permanent "Employability" Display (P86.1 – BC/ME) – "How can I demonstrate employability skills?"

As can be appreciated, reference to skills, particularly framed by "*employability*" and utility, were very common. Being immersed by references to "employability skills" conditions students to see this as the universal lingua franca of education *and* employment. Through the strong universalising frame of "employability skills", a strong discursive bridge (or, weak classification) between education and employment is reinforced. In *Fig. 4.1.* above, we can this reinforcing link clearly: "Employers suggest that the skills graduates need *are the same as the skills college leavers require*"

Caroline linked the challenges students faced writing personal statements with their lack of experience in recruitment – "you're *not necessarily used to it* and *a lot of them aren't*" – and noted:

> "…they're not sure *at that age* how to sell themselves *properly.*" (FN3, pp. 27, *my emphasis*)

Mentors understood students' inability to speak themselves in terms of skills as resulting, in part, from their lack of experience in recruitment. However, the 'real' issue was that students failed to understand how they are required to understand and perform themselves ("properly") in these contexts. To master the language of skills, then, not only do students need to adopt the corresponding subjectivity requiring they view their education instrumentally in terms of the skills it has 'given' them, but must also become adept self-marketers.

However, the fact education and employment appear weakly classified also seemed to cause confusions regarding the structure and content of a personal statement compared to a CV. Hayley (*Pastoral Mentor*) intimated a significant problem in initial drafts was incorrect structure, which she, in part, attributed to students misunderstanding what a personal statement is *not:*

> R: I suppose then […] is one of the things you want them to learn, as I say, is this notion that they need to talk in the right ways, is that one things you try and hammer home in those first activities and with first drafts, telling them what a personal statement *is* and…?

Hayley: What it's not.

[…]

R: What do you think those pre-conceived ideas are [*students*] come in with? What do they *think* a personal statement *is*?

Hayley: So, they think they're applying for a job, like they think they're more applying for a job like, 'I'm a good communicator, I've good interpersonal skills, I'm a… reliable, my attendance is 100%'. I've had that in statements, that's a reference they make.

R: And so, are those the wrong type of skills to talk about, or maybe the wrong way to talk about those skills?

Hayley*:* Yeah, yeah […] what it is is, they don't realise that they're applying to be a Student of a subject for the next three years, like they forget that, and they think they're selling themselves as a person, well they kind of are but they're also selling themselves as a potential student, not as a person; a job's a bit different […] like, it's different, isn't it? And sometimes you get parents input into it that makes it even worse 'cos they think they're applying for a job as well, but they're not […] maybe they'll say, my Dad works in recruitment and you think 'Ohhhh! That's not gonna help!'

R: What is the danger in confusing a CV with a personal statement for a UCAS application?

Hayley: Well, it's just *too much of the wrong stuff* […] people say, '*I've done my CV, I'll just send you that', well, that's not good, that's not what it is*.

R: So, it [*i.e. a CV*] is closely related but not the same?

Hayley: [*long tone*] Nooooo. Of course it's not, no.

R: Well, you know it had struck me that they are framed as quite similar in many ways…

Hayley: *They are*, but, structure's different. (IT2Hayley – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 23-24, *my emphasis*)

Hayley highlights problems resulting from students fundamentally misunderstanding what it is they think they're doing – "they think they're applying for a job […] *they don't realise that they're applying to be a student*". This confusion, I think, is noteworthy given how weakly classified education and employment are, and personal statements and CVs are, when set within the strong

frame of "employability skills". Hayley's mention of parents who work "in recruitment" as making

matters worse, I feel, also highlights how closely aligned education and employment are for students

and parents yet equally, how problematic this is in the eyes of pastoral mentors.

Though, in my opinion, Hayley doesn't seem able to articulate significant differences between a

personal statement and a CV, save noting the "structure's different". This genre-specific confusion

emerges from the weak classifications of education and employment and their embedded,

essentialised practices. The confusion arises because what one *has to do* in a personal statement

and a CV are essentially the same – "selling themselves".

Along these same lines, during interview I asked Caroline:

> R: "What's the difference in say, a cover letter and a personal statement?"
> Caroline: "Well just in terms of *the kind of language they use* […] it's [*i.e. a CV*] just a
> lot more of a professional piece of writing whereas even though it [*i.e. personal
> statement*] is a formal piece of writing, I wouldn't class a personal statement as a
> professional piece of writing; they're kind of interchangeable words but…"
> (ITxCaroline – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 118-119*, my emphasis*)

For Caroline, a personal statement is "subject-specific" whereas a cover letter/CV is "professional".

And, while "formal" and "professional" are "[i]nterchangeable" descriptors, paradoxically, they do

not represent the same things. Caroline's later description of universities listing "what they're

looking for" as a "person specification […] like a job description", and her characterisation that

writing a "personal statement is like doing a cover letter" (IT2Caroline – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 32-33), also

clearly demonstrates the confusing intertextuality of discourses and practices of recruitment in

educational selection.

During a Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson, Laura (Pastoral Mentor) gave students a copy of a "real life

example of a Science Oxbridge personal statement" (FN39, pp. 167) with a 5-question task to scaffold

their analysis. Particularly relevant here was question 4 – "what information could also be valuable in a cover letter for a job?" – which I posed to a group of students:

> R: "Oh, this is a good question, 'what information could also be valuable in a cover letter for a job?' Do you think, in some ways, the personal statement is like an 'Educational CV' maybe?"
>
> Michael: "Yeah, yeah, it is, definitely, 'cos like you're selling yourself, aren't you?!"
>
> R: "Ok, so is that what you have to do in a personal statement and a CV? 'Sell yourself', market yourself…"
>
> Michael: "Yeah, you have to big yourself up, you have to!" (FN39 – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 14 – 15)

Students, it seems, have made meaning of a personal statement as (something like) an 'educational CV' based on the confusing messages communicated to them that attempt to maintain strong classifications between a personal statement and a CV while education and employment are weakly classified through the strong universalising frame of (employability) 'skills'.

Immature and inexperienced students "don't know" how to speak and understand themselves in terms of skills where the mentors' job is to teach (i.e. *socialise*) students into this 'new' knowledge system. Bernstein may refer to such forms of learning and socialisation within the "received frame" (1971, pp. 240-241) of skills, as forming part of a (not so) "hidden curriculum" (1975, pp. 143) where acquisition of its requisite technical capacities and the adoption of new subjectivities it demands represents an "*essential cultural qualification*" (Beck, 1992, pp. 76, *emphasis in original*) for students to be successful not just in education, but in life. As Caroline said during interview:

> "I guess it's preparing them for the real world." (IT2Caroline – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 32)

This is not simply preparation for higher education, this is an apprenticeship in employability needed "*for* the real world". If students wish to be successful in life they must acquire this "*essential cultural qualification*" (*ibid*). Shuker (2014), in her definition of "self-marketing", states this practice

"constitute[s] a technology of career progression" (pp. 228) and perhaps, too, acquisition and mastery of the language of skills, and adoption of corresponding subjectivities and practices of self-promotion in the personal statement, constitutes a similar technology.

Students, regardless of the reality or accuracy of such judgements, are characterised by mentors as having firstly, comparatively little experience of the world of employment/recruitment, and accordingly, possessing very little knowledge of how to perform successfully in these contexts – i.e. they have not yet learned this essential language of 'skills' due to their inexperience. Though, I would point out here that many of my student participants did in fact have jobs, and many had a significant degree of experience in employment, even if only in part-time or voluntary capacities. However, the common deficit view is that students do not fully grasp the appropriate ways to speak and be heard, and more fundamentally still, they do not fully grasp the appropriate ways in which they are to understand themselves and their education in terms of 'skills', where experience in recruitment is thought to provide such knowledge and practices. This constructed and externally-ordained deficit then provides an entryway for intervention by pastoral mentors where they may teach their students this language or specific form of literacy. However, elements of intertextuality in the discourse of skills, and the weak classifications of a personal statement and a CV presents significant issues for both mentors and students. Mentors are keen to impress that the two documents and types of writing are different but are at pains to truly articulate this separation due to the equally weakly classified domains of education and employment. As such, students (and parents) are understandably, though perhaps not justifiably, thought to 'confuse' the two types of writing. The confusion itself comes from the fact that they are, paradoxically, simultaneously characterised as *the same* and *different*. 'Confusion' though is a characterisation of the mentors, where students themselves seemed quite clear about the connection of a CV and a personal statement, and later, education and employment. Again, this strikes me as another form of *balancing act*. Lessons *can* and *should* be learned from CV writing, job applications and cover letters,

but this knowledge is, contradictorily, *not* the basis on which to structure ones' understanding of and

approach to writing a personal statement.

6.3. Learning the (t)ropes

Having learned the way/s they are required to understand and speak themselves in terms of skills, students must then be taught how to structure their writing in accordance with genre-specific conventions. By using scaffolded writing frames and frameworks, mentors teach students the accepted conventions of the personal statement. Essentially, having learned to understand and speak themselves in the correct ways, students must *learn the (t)ropes* to put language-in-use correctly.

6.3.1. The simulacra of originality

Elaborating the discussion of the "rhetorical paradox" (Paley, 1996) presented earlier, here I want to examine a related problematic concerning originality in personal statements produced under strict genre-specific conventions via highly prescribed frames and frameworks.

6.3.1.2. "What makes a good one?": *"be original", be 'personal'*

During a Pastoral Tutor Group lesson, students watched a UCAS produced video titled, "How to write a UCAS undergraduate personal statement", where the narrator said:

> "Well, *nobody knows you better than you know yourself* […] I work for a university, I spend my life reading personal statements, I read lots, and I mean, lots. That means I know what makes a good personal statement and what makes a bad personal statement. *You have to remember everybody's unique*, there are lots of different ways of going about it, so this [*video*] should put you well on your way to writing an *excellent personal statement*." (FN39, pp. 174, *my emphasis*)

Students are routinely told, in different ways, they are "unique" individuals which supports the dominant wisdom that their personal statements would be unproblematically, automatically original and personal.

Fig. 5.0. Jason's Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson PowerPoint Slide – "What makes a good one? […] Relevance and Evidence!" (FN1, pp. 3)

Jason (*Pastoral Mentor*) showed his students the above slide, "What makes a good one?", where the first bullet point states it "should be original". Though, as the slide points out: "if you draw on your own experiences, *it will be original*". We could ask, then, what is the 'felt need' underpinning explicit calls to "be original" if personal statements are assumed to be unique reflections of unique individuals? By whatever definition one prefers*, a priori* notions of "good"/"bad" summarily devour the imperative to be, and possibility of actually being, original.

The narrator and Jason "*know* what makes a good personal statement" (and implicitly what makes a "bad" one) reinforcing their 'expert' status (and the students' 'novice' position) and undercutting the possibility of originality implied by the comment: "there's lots of ways of going about it". The possibility of being original is then undercut, again, by the very premise of instructive "How to" guidance from 'expert' sources. The sub-textual message is: be original, but only the ways the experts tell you. In other words: *don't be original!*

However, notwithstanding the myriad of conditioning instructional advice students receive from various 'experts' (i.e. adults) which undermine the possibility of being "original", a more obvious

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challenge exists in the dominant pedagogic strategies mentors use to support students production of 'good' personal statements *in the correct ways*.

6.3.1.3. Writing Frames: *Don't be original, follow the formula!*

By far the most common pedagogical strategy used to correctively structure students' writing were a seemingly endless variety of writing frames and frameworks. These structuring devices were used to pre-emptively guide students' production of a "good" personal statement *in the 'right' way*. Mentors noted an important task when introducing personal statement writing was, firstly, to familiarise students with the accepted structure and content of this "unique" (Christine, Pastoral Mentor, FN28 – BC/ME, pp. 125) piece of writing.

They approached this with highly generalised, graphical-schematic breakdowns of personal statement content organised around sectioned breakdowns with percentage weightings (FN2, pp. 11). An example of this generalised writing frame, or formula – euphemistically labelled a "suggested format" – can be seen in below in *Fig. 6.0.*:
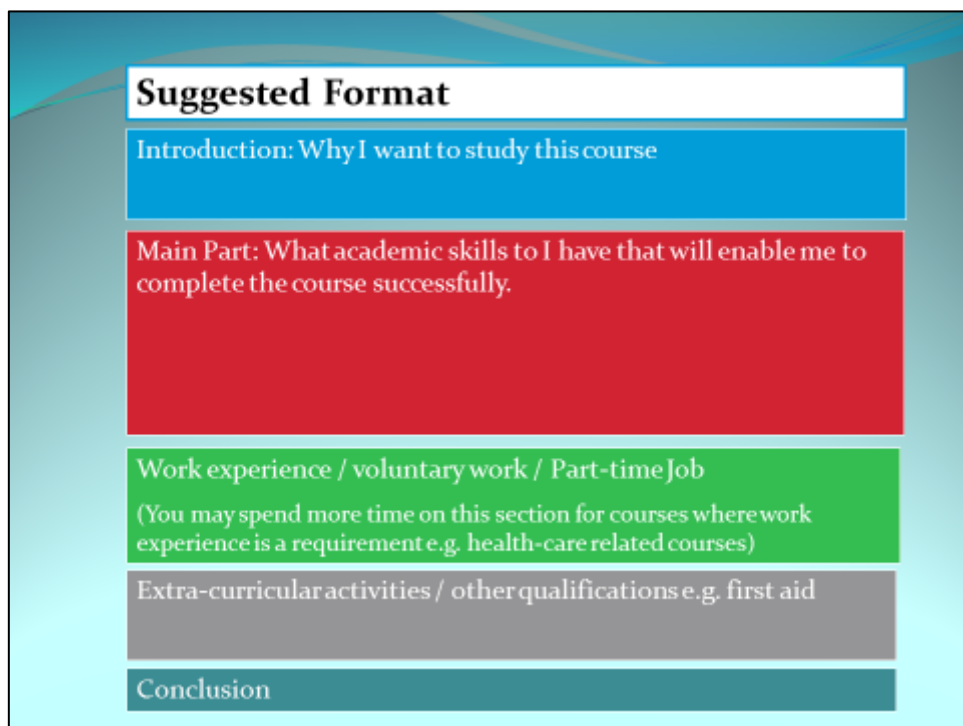
Fig. 6.0. Jason's Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson PowerPoint Slide – "Suggested Format" (FN1, pp. 3)

The above "format" mirrors the same structure utilised by all mentors; in fact, this exact slide was reused in numerous Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons I observed with different mentors. James (*Pastoral Mentor*) stated this *is* the accepted format for all personal statements regardless of institution and/or course being applied to – the only exception being personal statements for Oxford and Cambridge described as "a completely different *game*" (Christine, Pastoral Mentor, FN10, pp. 43, *my emphasis*). It seems hard to see where the possibility of being original exists in such a 'one size fits all' approach.

During an interview, Hayley explained the need for writing frames and frameworks based on students initially failing to understand the expected conventions of "structure and content":

> R: I have been really intrigued by a couple of things, first of all the structure, form and style of a personal statement and it sort of seems to be quite different to other types of writing you do in college, and quite different from other similar types of wri-…
>
> Hayley: [*interrupts*] Oh, wait, I've just thought of something, if you want it? I did my own outline of the structure and content of a personal statement which I give out to my students which you might find interesting.
>
> R: Absolutely, yeah… is this one of your own resources you've created?
>
> Hayley*:* Yeah, yeah… […] I did it, I think it's the 3rd year I've used it now and it helps them really kind of understand the structure […] it's not like a personal statement that they do for school, or, I mean, for coming to college. It's more subject related, isn't it really than they've had to do before, which I found was a massive problem at first. So, then I thought I just need to do something at first which clearly marks it out in space almost, so just letting them know that about three quarters should be dedicated to the subject, and the last quarter for like extra-curricular stuff.
>
> R: Ok, so is this you laying it out on an A4 page, three quarters and a quarter, actually mocking up the size of a text box on the page?
>
> Hayley: Yeah, and [*students*] just write in and, 'cos like obviously the whole thing is 4, 000 characters including spaces so I've put about 1,000 characters at the bottom relating to extra-curricular activities and extra skills they've gained from doing those, and then part-time work and then a conclusion. And then so, 3,000 is dedicated to

anything that links in with the subject; showing their interest and awareness of the subject.

R: So is this, I know lots and lots of them I've seen around in PowerPoints and stuff, is this like percentage breakdowns, you know intro 10%, etcetera...

Hayley: Yep, yeah, we've got the writing frames as well, and see that goes hand in hand with the thing I've written up but mine is *a two-sided A4 explanation of what goes in each section, and just it's really, just separating it into two parts, the first three quarters and the last quarter, just so they can get their head around it*. 'Cos like I've had it before *they get it the other way around, do a quarter on the subject and then three quarters on their extra-curricular activities* […] *It's the structure I've found, that's the first thing I noticed, it was all out of balance.* (IT2Hayley – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 1-3*, my emphasis*)

We can see how writing frames and frameworks, as pedagogical responses, are predicated on assumed problems in students' understanding the expectations and genre conventions regarding structure and content. This kind of deficit positioning highlights the imbalance in genre-specific knowledge which cements the uneven relations of power-knowledge between the 'novice' student and their 'expert' mentors legitimating the authority of their corrective intervention.

Hayley's "outline" document, used in conjunction with generic scaffolded writing frames, can be seen below in *Fig. 7.0.* and *7.1*.:

PERSONAL STATEMENTS for the UCAS form and/or job or apprenticeship applications-

An outline of the structure and content!

- Create these as a Word Document- nothing hand-written
- The whole ucas personal statement has to be up to 4000 characters
- There is a 47 line limit in the ucas personal statement box that you upload it to- if you focus on sticking to the character limit (4000) and a size 10 or 11 font then you should be working within the line limit
- You won't need to title it 'personal statement' or include your name in it- this won't be needed when you upload the statement onto your UCAS form
- Never direct your statement to one specific university- its directed at the subject of study/vocation/career
- This is not to be confused with a cover letter or a letter of application- this is a STATEMENT of interest in your chosen subject!

Introduction and main body of statement:

This will be ¾ of the whole statement- approx. 3000 characters- this section will show-*WHY YOU WANT TO STUDY THAT SUBJECT AT A HIGHER LEVEL/pursue that apprenticeship or career path...*

The Introduction Paragraph:

- Something specific that confirms you want to pursue this subject/vocation/career-
- You can write about what you have studied so far at A level- (a <u>specific</u> topic that has really grasped your interest)
- OR a personal experience, a trip you have been on, work experience, volunteering, a book you have read etc...
- MAKE IT CLEAR HOW/WHY THE EXAMPLES HAVE CONFIRMED OR FURTHERED YOUR INTEREST IN THIS CHOSEN DEGREE SUBJECT/VOCATION/CAREER.
- Your introduction needs to be original to <u>you</u> and have a specific example, nothing to 'wishy washy' and too general that could apply to anybody else, get straight to it with a strong example of anything listed in the above points

The main body of the statement should include paragraphs that are composed of:

- More info on what you have studied so far at A level- <u>specific</u> topics that have really grasped your interest OR a personal experience, a trip you have been on, work experience, volunteering, a book you have read etc...linked to your chosen course/future career
- **evidence of 'wider reading'**: newspapers, books, journals or magazines about that subject/vocation/career that you find enjoyable and insightful and that you have learnt further from- ask teachers/peers for their recommendations, look in the library at langdale road or euxton lane, local library, look online at book stores-type in your

Fig. 7.0. Hayley 'Personal Statement Guidance Document' Side 1 (P327 – BC/ME)

subject of interest and do a search, autobiographies of people in the profession already- in the business, financial, scientific, creative, or literary industries for example.
- Also: **Can you see the relevance of your subject in the context of our world today-** does this enforce your interest in that area of study? Tip: Look at bbc news website, what is happening NOW in the world of science/finance/economics/business/theatre/law/earth sciences/engineering/design...?
- **Write about how (wherever possible) the topics studied in your A Level subjects have given you knowledge and skills that WILL benefit you within your chosen degree subject/future career choice.**

....

The last paragraph AND the conclusion:

This will be just ¼ of the statement- approx. 1000 characters...

- **State your academic skills, strengths, experiences, ACHEIVEMENTS** <u>through college</u>, **which relate to your chosen course/subject/career:** trips you have been on- museums, public lectures, conferences, work experience, extended projects, any academic clubs/societies you are in, D of E, PT reps, student council, college ambassador- helped on open evenings, competitions etc.... ***RELATE every experience to a skill learnt/developed.
- **Write about out of college experiences/Interests/part time work; which have developed skills that will make you a successful candidate for this course/subject/career:** Sports teams/voluntary work/charity work/part time job....WHICH BUILD ON.....leadership skills, communication skills, organisation skills, ICT skills, numeracy skills, your ability to empathise with others, your ability to motivate others etc...***RELATE every experience to a skill learnt/developed.
- **Conclude** the statement in a short concise paragraph- Confirming your suitability/interest to study an undergraduate degree in this subject area/vocation/career. They also need to see that you are looking forward to being part of university life and the higher education learning environment.

*** PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS THE FORMAT THAT YOU CAN FOLLOW TO HELP YOU MAKE THE CORRECT START WITH THE PERSONAL STATEMENT. AS YOU PROGRESS THROUGH TO THE FINAL DRAFTS AFTER SUMMER, YOU WILL GAIN FEEDBACK ON FURTHER ADDITIONS OR CHANGES TO BE MADE TO THE STRUCTURE, FROM TEACHERS AND PERSONAL TUTOR.

Fig. 7.1. Hayley 'Personal Statement Guidance Document' Side 2 (P328 – BC/ME)

We can see how Hayley's general '¼ and ¾' formula is in fact much more heavily prescribed than it first sounds; it is simultaneously highly generic *and* specific. The structure and content of a personal statement are completely codified in this euphemistically defined "outline" document. The irony of the statement – "your introduction *needs to be original* [...] *nothing too 'wishy washy' and too*

general that could apply to anyone else" – seems laughably obvious in relation to this 'once size fits all' framework. Generic guidance like this must necessarily apply to *all* students thus acting on their already assumed individuality, and as such, ability to be original. More logistically/practically speaking, however, with only 4, 000 characters available and two full pages of guidance notes, being truly 'original' seems difficult given deviating Hayley's prescriptions is implicitly and explicitly discouraged.

To compound this further, the scaffolded writing frame Hayley's "outline" document was designed to complement is shown below in *Fig. 8.0.* and *8.1.*:

Your Personal Statement – A Writing Frame to start you off! This is not a final version!

Introduction (approx. 20%): What course/subject you want to study and why. Show understanding of what course entails (look at the course specification), and/or relate course to something topical (be up to date with the news/current affairs). What 'interests' you about the subject (give specific examples and explain why), and the particular university course you are applying for? Give your opinion on any issues/examples that you are discussing. Your genuine passion for and understanding of your chosen subject must be clear!!

Main Part (at least 60%): Show you have the academic skills and relevant experience to complete the course successfully. Why do you like your subject/s? What relevant academic and study skills have you acquired from all of your A Level subjects. What extra reading have you done? (what have you learned from it, how has it influenced you, what is your opinion on the subject). What related work experience have you done? (what skills/experience have you developed). What trips have you been on, what academic clubs/societies are you in? Extended project? Academic competitions? What academic achievements have you? Relate everything to a skill learnt/developed AND relate everything back to your chosen course.

Remember: email your draft personal statement to your Pastoral Mentor.

Fig. 8.1. "Your Personal Statement Writing Frame" Side 2 (P155 – LJMU – BC/ME)

Combine the "outline" document and this detailed writing frame, and again, I find it hard to see how students *can* be original – and moreover if being original is really what students are being encouraged to do.

I am struck by the powerful ironies embedded in these structuring documents when accompanied by calls to be original, perhaps indicative of their competing rationalities. The level of prescription and instruction, in the form of questions, prompts, examples, percentage weightings, emboldened and underlined text, do's and don'ts, belies the originality it calls for. There is no originality here, and

little possibility for it – and this is the point – it is a "simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1994/1981). The message 'Be original, but only in these ways', is as good as saying, 'Don't be original! Follow the formula!'

You must be original, but there is a conventional "format" all must follow to produce a "good" personal statement. A student can choose to follow the formula *or* "be original" (i.e. deviate) and, thus, accept the risks of producing a 'bad' personal statement – and few students, as noted earlier, want or are willing to entertain the precariousness of this 'freedom' and autonomisation.

Hayley's parting "NOTE" of the "outline" document is revealing in this respect:

> "THIS IS THE FORMAT THAT YOU CAN FOLLOW TO MAKE THE CORRECT START TO YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT" (P327- LJMU – BC/ME, *my emphasis*)

The notion of a format "you *can* follow" responsibilises students with the quality of their personal statements by framing adherence or deviation to conventions as a 'free' choice*.* A "suggested format", a "typical layout" (FN21, pp. 74), or other such normative ideas when conflated with an expected "standard" or a "good"/"bad" product, compounded again with the powerful imperative to '*be what they're looking for*', points to just how challenging, and actually undesirable, being original is. Instead, students are offered a contrived form of freedom and originality under the guise of their own individuality and responsible decision making.

To support these interpretations, ideas of "good"/"bad" were regularly reinforced in "dos" and "don'ts". Below is a selection of some the many "dos" and "don'ts" communicated to students:

Fig. 9.0. Carla, MMU Personal Statement Workshop, PowerPoint Slide – "Do:" and "Don't:"

(FN21, pp. 83)
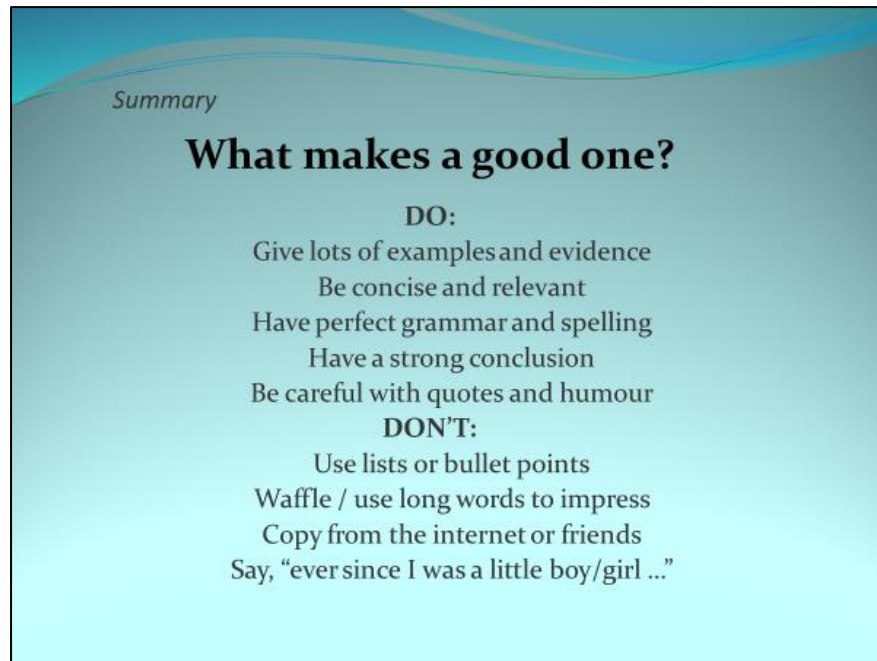
Fig. 9.1. Jason Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson PowerPoint Slide – "What makes a good one?" – "Do:" and "Don't" (FN1, pp. 7)

"So… *what do you avoid*? Well, the first thing is verbal diarrhoea, you've gotta keep focused, you haven't got enough space to go off piste so make sure you're being relevant to the course you're applying for! That's really important. Other things, showing off. *Don't be* arrogant, it's absolutely fine to back yourself up with some really good examples, that's called good showing off, but *don't be* bad showing off, that is arrogance. *Avoid* flowery language, keep it to plain English, we need to understand what it is you're trying to say, so *avoid* the honour and priviledge of a particular work experience and just focus on plain English. *Avoid* clichés! I don't want to see anybody saying 'I've wanted to be a doctor ever since I was born' because you haven't, that's rubbish! Keep it to actual, normal, plain English. Copying. *Don't copy!* They have some software called 'CopyCatch'. It will catch you if you copy somebody else's work. *So, they're the things you need to avoid.*" (Narrator, UCAS Video "How to write a UCAS undergraduate personal statement", FN39, pp. 175, *my emphasis*)

Fig. 9.2. UCAS Pocket-Size Application Guide 2016-17 – "Thinking about your personal statement?" – "Do…" and "Don't…" (P148 -LJMU – BC/ME)

Advice framed as "dos" and especially "don'ts" respectively constitute targets and avoidance goals –

do this, do that, but don't do this and definitely not that. In this way, students are rendered

increasingly passive and dependent on external knowledge from the 'experts' who *know* the rules

and 'tricks of the trade'. Advice in the form "don'ts" also easily transforms into a 'legal' code

governing and disciplining the activity and, importantly, those who engage in it. And this makes

sense given some mentors referred to common mistakes as "personal statement *crimes*" (FN5, pp.

39). Disciplining codes of this kind work against the imperative and possibility to "be original". There

are so many well-defined "dos" and "don't"s that it becomes hard to imagine how calls for

originality represent much more than lip service. Devine & Irwin (2005), in their analysis of

autonomy and agency, state:

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"In schools it is still usual to act on the assumption that Students are individuals despite the concerted effort to undermine that individuality in nearly every regard […] Failure to conform often elicits a stern speech based on the discourse of 'choice', and evoking the notion of autonomy. *The child is admonished for not exerting their own will, that is to say, for not conforming to the expectations of adults* […]. It is extremely useful to be able to appeal to the individuality and autonomy of the Student—it places blame on a relatively powerless person, and not on the teacher or parent, and therefore manages to avoid calling into question the practices of the school or classroom or home […] [*raising*] questions about the way in which we constitute ourselves and others in the game of education." (pp. 329, *my emphasis*)

Indeed, some mentors while in one breathe cited the absolute need for writing frames and frameworks also intimated, they were aware of the paradox they too were labouring under. Many bemoaned personal statements as being unavoidably "formulaic", "samey" (FN10, pp. 42) and highly "generic" (FN25, pp. 116). Caroline (*mentor*) noted her own apathy stating "It's all the same, just *gets very repetitive* […] it's the *same things over and over again* […] *we get a bit sick to death of UCAS* […] *a lot of it is just the repetition, you know it's always the same*" (FN25, pp. 113)

Caroline, alike her colleagues, by the end of the drafting process expressed a deep sense of apathy and frustration due to the lack of originality, creativity and high degrees of "repetition" referring to both structure, content, phrasing and recurrent "crimes". What is still somewhat confusing, however, is that mentors were aware the cause of this commonality/unoriginality lay, in part, in their perpetuation of an accepted 'formula' and "format" through writing frames and frameworks, guided by the dominant conventions of UCAS – and yet, did not consider changing their approaches.

Some mentors even intimated how they believed many personal statements were not read by admissions tutors because of their obvious similarity and repetitiveness. Caroline stated "personal statements are completely pointless […] probably 80% of them aren't even read […] I don't think admissions officers generally read personal statements […] because they're all going to be generic"

(IT1Caroline – BC/ME, pp. 79-80, *see also*, FN10, pp. 42). And, while speaking to a student ambassador, Carlos, from Sheffield Hallam University at a UCAS event I attended with *Brook* students, these beliefs were echoed:

> Carlos: "…you know you'll find here a lot of the institutions are really pushing the whole, pushing this fact of the personal statements, and all the presentations here are about personal statements, and how to make your personal statement stand out. *Working for a university, I can tell you that personal statements mean jack-shit!*"
>
> R: "Well, you know, funny you should say that […] some advisors in the college I'm in have said similar kinds of things, and they wonder how much, if at all, personal statements are even read, or how important they *actually* are… but they say to the kids, you know '*this is the most important part of your application*'"
>
> Carlos: "*[laughs] It's not, It's not […] universities don't even look at it*."
>
> (FN36, pp. 141)

Perhaps, Caroline and her fellow mentors may be more astute than they might like to believe.

Students, I believe, quickly appreciate advice to be original as constituting little more than an expected form of lip service in modern progressive 'student-centred' education. Students are incessantly told they are 'unique' and are told to "be original!" but are thwarted at every turn through these structuring devices and associated pedagogic strategies. Quickly students understand that to produce a "good" personal statement, they must produce it in the "correct" ways by following the prescriptions of their 'expert' mentors and thus, avoid being truly original. They must do and be the same as everyone else. As Devine & Irwin (2005) note, "the self that is constituted as an autonomous individual" in these ways, "ends up being suffocated rather than free" (pp. 325).

6.3.1.4. Follow the models but "Do not copy!"

In addition to the use of writing frames and frameworks, mentors also made strategic use of personal statement extracts and examples in modelling activities as noted elsewhere.

As another example, James (mentor) showed his students two extracts from personal statement introductions respectively labelled, a "good" and "garbage intro" (FN2, pp. 12) highlighted in green and red; 'good' and 'bad'. Introducing these at the end of class, James told his students he had sent them a "shedload of resources" (FN2, pp. 12) including many 'good' models, and instructed students to make use of these "resources" saying "if you don't use anything else [...] this will help you start writing" (FN2, pp. 11). Oddly though, while students were told to follow the models and use the writing frames and frameworks they were given by their mentors, James emphatically ends with the comment: "Do not copy!" (FN2, pp. 12). Similarly, Andrea (*Pastoral Mentor*) told her students to "look online" (FN2, pp. 19) for 'good' examples and resources, noting university websites, UCAS and the 'StudentRoom' for example, but ended with the same warning: "Do not copy!" (FN2, pp. 19). Mentors, and invited speakers, all warned students that UCAS subjects all personal statements to in-house plagiarism detection called "UCAS Copy-Catch" – and if a student is found to have copied, plagiarised or re-/misappropriated the work of others, their application would be invalidated.

Though, maybe unsurprisingly, many students I spoke to told me they did, in fact, copy and "pinch things from others' personal statements" (FN21, pp. 82); some even told me they made things up entirely. And, in this sense, it is worth noting how examples and models are labelled, as '*resources*'.

A resource can be many things. It can be understood as a capital reserve from which one draws to improve their conditions and function more effectively and/or efficiently. A "resource" may also be a strategy adopted in adverse circumstances, as in *resource*fulness. Between these 'definitions' a theme can be noted. A "resource" is something *to be used*, directly and instrumentally, to improve one's situation, condition and functioning.

Students are told "Do not copy!" but, by the very discursive labels used to define the materials they are given to support their writing, students are positioned to see these, first and foremost, as things to be drawn from *directly* and *instrumentally* to assist them producing a 'good' personal statement. As such, students demonstrate their resource-fulness and enterprise by (re)using text from the

'good' examples they have access to. Students facing difficulty, it could be argued, show their resourcefulness at 'playing the game' in a different, more personally beneficial way, by using the "shedload of resources" they are given in the ways that most benefit them paying little attention to the 'rules' as it were. Copying and 'pinching', then, seems an entirely legitimate response given the contextual imperatives of the task, environment and the relatively diminished position of power in which students find themselves. It may be that students astutely 'see through' calls not to copy (as they do with calls to "be original!") and appreciate the hidden message: *to succeed, you must copy the 'good' ones*! Saltmarsh (2004) offers similar ideas in her analysis of plagiarism in HE, utilising de Certeau's (1988) theories of the productive capacity of consumption. Saltmarsh suggests academic plagiarism can be understood as a by-product of students' subject positionings as 'consumers' and their subsequent attempts to negotiate the institutional requirements of HE regarding the production of intellectual property through everyday practices of resistance, rather than through institutionally sanctioned means and structures which are inaccessible to them and that render them powerless. She argues (*ibid*, pp. 452-453):

> "Students seeking to negotiate a satisfactory means of progressing through the requirements of the institution may do so by the deployment of a range of tactics which seek to seize opportunities […] for instance by purchasing the intellectual property of another which is of superior quality to that of their own […] In the case of the tactic of plagiarism, that which goes undetected remains an unanticipated, albeit illicit, product of consumption […] *The tactic of plagiarism can thus be understood beyond its current constructions as 'cheating' or 'academic misconduct' and instead considered as a productive practice which disrupts and subverts the consumption of education as a 'product' from which consumers are expected to derive benefits as prescribed by the institution while simultaneously submitting to its strategic demands.*"

As before, students who 'pinch' and copy seem to be (illicitly) evading the demands placed on them by creatively and tacitly satisfying them, thus shifting the dynamics of power back in their favour as

they 'game' the 'game' to their own advantage, turning 'illicit' practices into legitimate ones in order to succeed.

While interviewing Mark (*student*), I asked how he approached writing his personal statement where he revealed:

> Mark: So, yeah, I wrote up a first draft basically by getting together a list of things that might go in and what I might write about them and I had my brothers personal statement as an example of a successful one, albeit for Computer Science so I wrote emm, my first draft […] some of these sentences, especially with the beginning and the end, some of them were effectively written by my Mum […] and then I had my brothers example which […] had been successful […] Emm, to be honest I think the paragraph I ended with I think, well the start one as well, those were written largely by my Mum" (IT2MDj – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 185-197)

Mark had in fact used much of the same text from his Brother's "successful" personal statement and admitted that "some sentences [..] were effectively written by" his Mum; even qualifying this admission further, stating, "to be honest […] the paragraph I ended with I think, well the start one as well, *those were written largely by my Mum*". While this may not be, precisely, plagiarism as the standard definitions go, in principle this was not all Mark's own work.

Many other students intimated they too had gotten help from parents and had used old, 'successful' personal statements from relatives and family friends (*especially from those that worked in or were studying in HE at the time*), or simply cribbed lines, paraphrasing and editing from the litany of personal statement exemplars available from even a basic Google search.

Indeed, more directly still, many students told me they had simply 'made things up' to put in their personal statements to 'look good' and that, among students, this was seen as a relatively accepted practice (*see* Shuker, 2014):

Grainne: "…like, you have to write like what charity things you've done and like whether you've done things after school and things like that."

Gina: "I said I'd done the Race For Life… and I didn't [laughs]"

Gia: "Yeah, like I said I used to do dancing and stuff like that, and like did after school clubs and whatever but like I didn't" (FN18-BC/ME, pp. 16-17)

Even Caroline (*mentor*) told me that for some of her students who *she felt* "haven't got a lot [*to talk about*]" and needed to "beef things up", that "bending the truth" (as opposed to "outright lies" she qualified (IT1AMc – BC/ME, pp. 64)) was a legitimate response; even a practical necessity. Remember Marianna from earlier who was "UNSURE WHAT TO WRITE". In that excerpt from her draft personal statement, Marianna received the feedback suggestion from her mentor that, in the absence of some 'relevant evidence' to add to "beef […] up" her personal statement, she could "*make up an example of you giving a group presentation*" (MSA1:PS/*MP* -BC/ME, pp. 21-23, *my emphasis*).

During an informal interview, Caroline explained (what she felt) the social exigency legitimising and normalising the practice of "bending the truth" was:

Caroline: "I mean, I suppose it's the same in the professional world like, the number – often the people who are in the really high-end jobs earning lots of money have probably completely lied through their teeth to get there 'cos they'll do their CV and not say something like 'stock rotation', they'll make it 'stock management' and so in a lot of ways, it's just like preparing them for the professional world."

R: "Well, that's a good point, so you're not actually teaching them about personal reflection and writing personal statements, necessarily, you're teaching them the rules of the game, the rules of life, the rules of how to navigate the professional world?"

Caroline: "*Teaching them how to blag*!" (FN25, pp. 13, *my emphasis*)

For Caroline, the most 'successful' people in life "have probably lied through their teeth to get there" meaning it's ok for everyone else to do the same; this is the nature of 'the game'. This is framed as "preparing them for the professional world" where seemingly everyone knows "how to blag!" and does – students, then, must be taught and learn this 'skill' too to be successful.

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Caroline also told me that for some of her students still lagging near official UCAS deadlines, she will occasionally help expedite a final draft by composing extracts for her students to "copy and paste" (FN19, pp. 65) into their statements. Realising the ethical problem this highlights as she tells me this, she quickly added: "I probably shouldn't be telling you that" (FN19, pp. 65) – suggesting, at least, that she is aware of the 'illicit' practices she was engaging in. However, while Caroline is aware of this ethical dilemma and aware it's probably something she shouldn't be doing (or telling an 'outsider'), she frames her actions as necessary given the perceived competitiveness of university applications and her beliefs about inequality relative to, what she understands as, the more intensive forms of HE preparation in "private school" (ITxAMc – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 217) – perhaps also implicating a classed dimension to her beliefs:

> Caroline: "you're sort of thinking, because of the number of people who *are* getting them written for them, I don't want to put my students at a disadvantage but then it's obviously not going too far 'cos and the end of the day […] it's their personal statement…" (ITxAMc – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 218)

Clearly, the law "do not copy!", plagiarise or misappropriate others' work, is not a strict rule. In fact, in this context, it is not a rule at all; at least not one that cannot or should not be broken. In fact, it seems to be almost called for given the absolute felt need to ensure one's enduring competitiveness above all else. Caroline believes "private school" students get so much help they may as well be "written for them" thereby legitimising/rationalising her own actions. Likewise, Mark *knows* (on one level) plagiarism and getting parents to write parts for you is forbidden but he did not particularly see what was doing as illicit or inappropriate. He was merely using the variety of "resources" made available to him – exemplars, models, parents, brothers, etc. – in the manner most beneficial for him, to navigate the imperatives and achieve the goals of personal statement writing successfully.

Plagiarism is forbidden, but certain practices forming aspects of what may be thought to constitute plagiarism seem entirely reasonable and necessary. In the absence of any 'good' activities through

which one can discuss themselves and their skills, it seems ok to '*make something up*' because it is competitiveness and success that are all important. So too, then, the nature and status of 'evidence' (*which I shall explore in the following section*) is radically undermined to the point of absurdity; ideas of truth, authenticity or originality, too, matter very little in this 'game' of performances. Again, as Ball (2000) notes of performative "fabrications" such as these: "[i]n many instances, these representations are simulacra." (pp. 8-9). Marianna's fabrications, Mark's Mother's and Brother's help fabricating his *own* account, Grainne, Gina and Gia's fabrications or Caroline's fabrications for her lagging students – none seem truly concerned with "truthfulness" or authenticity to self and 'reality', but shrewdly understand it is only the "effectiveness" of their performances that truly matters. By copying, plagiarising, 'pinching' and creatively using the 'resources' at their disposal in these ways, students and mentors negotiate a new, better, that is more powerful, positioning for themselves and use these modestly subversive strategies and tactics to 'game the game'.

6.4. Learning to Perform

In this final section, I focus on exploring how students perform themselves – their identity, suitability and (cap)ability – in the correct manner through skills talk to achieve the communicative purpose of the personal statement.

6.4.1. Evidence – Evidencing: *"saying what you do is not enough!"*

During interview, Caroline explained an additional requirement relative to a students' articulations of themselves via the language of skills, saying:

> "I've been noticing from the personal statements I've got so far about the ones who have actually *evidenced their skills* […] a lot of them haven't." (ITxCaroline – BC/ME – pp. 8-9, *my emphasis*)

At least initially, students face challenges identifying their assumed skills and structuring their writing "properly", however, another challenge presents in the need to provide supporting "evidence" of ones' skills.

Mentors instructed students they must discuss their skills in the context of educational or extra-curricular activities and experiences that demonstrate the acquisition, use and/or development of those skills. Among mentors and guest speakers invited to the college, this message was consistently reinforced:

> "Right, personal statements […] we're going to talk about what you've done so far, and how you're going to prove it […] show, don't tell; *it's like an essay really, you make a claim and you give evidence*" (Helen, Cambridge University Representative, 'Oxbridge Applicant Day', FN15, pp. 51, *my emphasis*)

> "the main bit [*of the UCAS application*] for you will be the personal statement, and that's the place for you to explain why you really want to do the course […] and then going into more detail about *how you can back that up with examples* of like, when you've showed good organisation skills, communication *through different activities you've been involved in* […] *rather than just kind of saying 'I do this'* 'cos it'll be like,

'well, can you tell us *why* you do it' and *back it up with an example*" (Carla, Manchester Metropolitan Representative, FN21, pp. 68-72, *my emphasis*)

"So, where do you start? Well, the first thing you need to do is […] Tell us how you got excited about this particular course, did you read an article about something? Did you get inspired? Did you then go and see a lecture? […] that's the sort of thing they're looking for […] and *you can get all of this evidence from work experience, outside reading, all of the sorts of things you do to back up your interest in the course, so throw those examples at the page* […] So, whatta you do next? […] *you move onto the middle paragraph, that's the chunky bit, that's the evidence you're going to need to prove your interest in the particular course. You're also going to sprinkle in some of the bits about your skills and good qualities so we know you can actually do it*" (Narrator, UCAS "How to write a UCAS Undergraduate personal statement" video, FN39, pp. 175, *my emphasis*)

"When they write that UCAS form they'll have to fill in a personal statement […] *They've got to have some concrete evidence that they are more interested than other students* […] *concrete evidence that shows they are interested in this subject, they want to learn more about this subject*." (Jason, Head of A-Level Studies, "Prestigious Universities" Parents Evening address, FN28, pp. 129, *my emphasis*)

When researching: 'How will I provide evidence of this?'

What are they looking for?	My evidence
Interest in and commitment to the subject	Why I want to do the course / Wider reading / Work experience / Know more about the subject!
Academic Skills e.g. analysis, research,	Where have you used these in your current course?
Transferable skills e.g. presentation / communication / team work	Current course, extra-curricular activities, part-time job
Able to cope with HE study e.g. independent learning, time management,	Current course, part-time job

Fig. 10.2. Jason's Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson PowerPoint Slide – "Saying what you do is not enough!'" (FN1,

pp. 3)

The title of the above slide – "*saying what you do is not enough!*" – sums up the imperative to/for

evidence. Anyone can say something, but for it to be taken as 'true', you need evidence.

Furthermore, as evident from the above extracts, a significant logic underpinning the need for

evidence is to "prove your interest" (FN39, pp. 175); in fact, to prove you "are *more interested* than

other students" (FN28, pp. 129) showing the competitive element. One's skills and evidence, then,

function as general markers of passion and enthusiasm apparently necessary in (what they are told

is) the competitive context of selection. One prospective Cambridge student, Stephen, described his

approach to writing as "tailoring everything to 'Why Cambridge?' […] just 'Why?! Why does that

apply to Cambridge?'" and remarked how he felt he needed to stress and (over)emphasise his

interest which he described as "fake passion" (IT1Stephen – BC/ME, pp. 13). Again, we could read

Stephen's shrewd comments about "fake passion" in the same way as students 'playing the game',

or 'gaming the game', by strategically 'wording' their personal statements to hide diverse course

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choice and construct an image of themselves as appropriately focused on one area of study.

Stephen, here, appears to know that what he is required to do is emphatically demonstrate his

passion; in fact, *over*-emphasise it in order to make himself *more* attractive and thus *more*

competitive. But, he experiences this as inauthentic – "fake" – showing just how astute his

understanding of the 'game' he is required to play and what he must do to be successful, actually is.

To reiterate Ball's (2000, pp. 9) thoughts on performative "fabrications" of this nature: "Truthfulness

is not the point – the point is their effectiveness in the market…". We could can read Stephen's over-

emphasis on communicating 'inauthentic' passion as a minor tactic of resistance; a tactic of 'bending

the rules of the game', or 'gaming the game', to reposition himself and tip the dynamics of power

toward himself in order to better ensure the creation of his own positional advantage and

competitiveness; 'playing the game' in a different way by re-appropriating the dominant pracices

and discourses, and making them function in a different register, *for him*. And, of course, this is all

the more absurd and paradoxical given the 'official' discourses, in *Brook*, of evidence and its

associated notions of proof, confirmation and verification. Stephen, here, is making 'evidence'

function in a different way.

It seems rather obvious the practice "make a claim and […] give evidence" (FN15, pp. 51), is based on

positivistic "scientism[s]" (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, pp. 630) drawing on discourses of empirical

validity and reliability, also evident in descriptions of personal statements as like "a scientific paper"

(Andrea, Pastoral Mentor, FN3, pp. 21).

In Jason's Pastoral Tutor Group lesson, from which the above slides were taken, he showed the slide

"what makes a good one?" (*cited previously*). In the bottom right corner of that slide, in bold yellow

text it says: "Relevance and Evidence!". "[R]elevance" introduces a contingency to evidence. The

relevance of one's evidence is judged through the specific academic-disciplinary discourse

communities and knowledge contexts those skills and experiences are situated, discussed and the

audiences to whom they are directed. Ding (2007, pp. 371), citing other analyses of personal

statements (Asher, 2000; Mumby, 1997; Stewart, 1996; Curry, 1991), notes a central communicative

goal of personal statements is demonstrating one's (cap)abilities through "discussing *relevant* life

experiences" (pp. 377). In *Fig. 10.1.* (above)*,* Jason outlines "what they're looking for" and "my

evidence" showing students the instrumental correspondence between understanding the perceived

specifications of the 'ideal' candidate and the evidence one must provide, reinforcing the contextual

importance of research and students understanding the academic community/s their statements

must serve.

Essentially, students are required to engage in a form of calculus about their educational and extra-

curricular experiences and the skills they *could* extrapolate from these activities in terms of their

perceived potential worth/value to an institution or course to show they are "what they're looking

for".

For instance, something universities are "looking for", Jason notes, are "transferrable skills"

signposting activities which could be used as evidence – "current course, extra-curricular activities,

part-time job". What specific skills students extrapolate from this generalised repertoire and how

they talk about them come down to the academic-disciplinary discourse communities they seek

entry to wherein those skills *are* "relevant" and valued. Jason signals this stating, "relate *present* to

future" where the "future" is their chosen undergraduate programme. Implicitly, students are

invited to map the skills of the 'ideal' candidate assumed essential to successful study of their

chosen course back onto their experiences and (re)story (i.e. perform) themselves accordingly.

Students begin to understand that to gain a place they must *fit* (or 'match' (Ding, 2007, pp. 379))

with the specific academic-disciplinary constructions of the 'ideal' candidate they are meant to be. In

this sense, skills talk are strategic performances for specific audiences "looking for" certain things.

They are performative "enactment[s]" (Butler, 1990) of a student's understanding of "what they're

looking for" to communicate suitability and capability; that they (are) 'fit'. Indeed, Jason says one of

the things "they're looking for" is students to demonstrate they are "[a]ble to cope with HE study" (*Fig. 10.1.*).

A primary performative objective for students, then, is to signal their "disposition to be, and above all to become, one of us" (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 100). On this reading, ideas of "relevant" evidence might link with the differential possession of intersecting forms of cultural, social and symbolic capital (Jones, 2012). Others have noted the deployment of diverse forms of capital in personal statements as "an indicator of disciplinary socialization" through students' emphasis on constructing identities as apprentice scholars or would-be professionals (Brown, 2004, pp. 242).

Brown (*ibid*, pp. 244), citing Keith-Spiegel & Weiderman (2000, pp. 38), additionally notes that: "[t]o a large measure, an applicant's success depends on whether the applicant 'appear[s] capable of fulfilling the needs of others!'". Reference to the necessity of "fulfilling the needs of others", i.e. admissions tutors, were evident in advice that students should know their "target audience" (FN21, pp. 74); needed to "impress" (FN1, pp. 4; FN21, pp. 70), "dazzle" (FN3, pp. 48), 'satisfy' (FN15, pp. 50) and "convince" (FN2, pp. 14) these ominously named "selectors" (FN1, pp. 4; 19) through "good showing off" (FN29, pp. 175).

Because of this need to 'fit', however, there must be an inevitable trade-off between who students are and who they are expected to be. As Stephen (student) noted, echoing Neil earlier, about 'authentic' self-portrayal:

> Stephen: "I guess it is a bit manipulative […] *you gotta portray yourself in a certain way […]* it's exaggerated, I don't like it." (IT1PP – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 179*, my emphasis*)

Mark (student) similarly said:

> R: …What kinds of things do you put in your personal statement, or not? How do you have to portray yourself?
> Mark*: Well, *you have to portray yourself as a person they want you to be*, I guess…
> (IT1MD – BC/ME, pp. 15*, my emphasis*)

Even more explicitly still, Caroline commented:

> Caroline: "…*they want a certain type of individual* […] *So, you do kind of mould*
> *yourself* to – oh, what would a University of Birmingham Student be like? Or, what
> would a University of Manchester Student be like? […] Ooh, they want someone
> that's like that, so I need to make sure I cover that in my personal statement."
> (IT2Caroline – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 32-33*, my emphasis*)

Clearly, both mentors and students are aware of the game of performances they must play making a misnomer of a *personal* statement and undercutting the authenticity and assumed 'truth' of ones' evidence. Mark, alike Stephen, is keenly aware there is *a* "person… they want you to be" meaning "you gotta portray yourself in a certain way" to be successful. To achieve this, students necessarily need to "mould" themselves to admissions tutor's expectations; "it is a bit manipulative". Again, students are 'playing the game'.

The task for students, then, is threefold: understand "what they're looking for", then, from this understand the "type of individual" "they want you to be", and, in their writing, "mould", 'manipulate' and fit themselves to that image.

The framework for structuring students writing to perform themselves in this way relies on the triad *experience-skills-course*. This triad represents the basic structural framework for putting the instrumental language of skills in use for students to perform themselves appropriately and successfully. More profoundly, however, this triadic structuring framework represents a form of governmentality through its restructuration of subjectivity positioning students to understand education instrumentally in terms of the skills they have 'made' from these activities and how these 'products' are to be understood and used.

6.4.2. Experience-Skills-Course: "As easy as ABC"

All mentors and guest speakers discussed this framework – *experience-skills-course* – in various ways though all focused elementally on the need to evidence skills in the context of prior experiences

relative to their chosen course/s. Carla, in her personal statement workshop, described the "ABC Framework" (FN21, pp. 73) developed by UCAS – shown below in *Fig. 11.0.*:
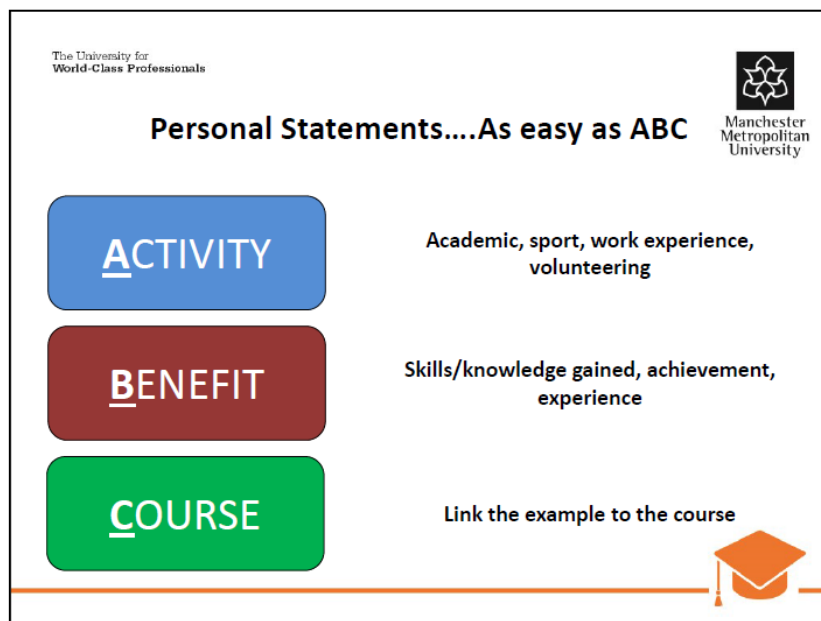
Fig. 11.0. Manchester Metropolitan University Personal Statement workshop - "ABC Framework" (FN21, pp. 73)

What was the "Activity"? What was the "Benefit"? How does this relate to your "Course"?; "easy as ABC". Carla explained this (infantilised) "framework" stating:

> "This ABC Framework, which is something UCAS came [*sic*] up with a few years ago, is *to try and help you reflect on what you've learned in an activity or some work experience* or even something like volunteering […] So, *it's always thinking, what the activity was, what were you involved in, did you develop any skills* […] And *then, is that relevant to your course?* […] *the link should be obviously there*" (Carla, MMU Personal Statement Workshop, FN21, pp. 73-74*, my emphasis*)

The important part, here, is "the link"; the instrumental relation constructed between "Activity", "Benefit" and "Course". And, this is reinforced by advice in writing frames (*Fig. 8.0.* and *8.1.*) "**Relate everything to a skill learnt/developed AND relate everything to back to your chosen course**". This 'linking', is where strategic and tactical performative storying of oneself enter, i.e. crafting desirable performances *for* specific audiences. Furthermore, "the link should be *obviously there*"; that is,

obvious to the course/discipline and the gatekeepers. This 'obviousness' is perhaps an indication of the accuracy of a student's understanding of "what they're looking for" and the quality of their performances to demonstrate emergent academic disciplinary socialisation and signal they are (becoming) "one of us" (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 100).

Personally, what I find most intriguing about the "ABC" framework, particularly in Carla's description, is the *work* of these frames – "this ABC Framework […] is *to try and help you reflect on what you've learned* […] *it's always thinking what the activity was* […] *did you develop any skills* […] *then, is that relevant to your course?*". The "ABC" frame-*works* as a form of governmentality by restructuring students' subjectivities and obliging them to make sense of and represent themselves in specific ways. This frame *works,* then, by providing an instrumentally inflected discursive scaffold through which skills become the primary means of constructing and communicating one's identity and value for admissions tutors. Students experience a startling obligation to conceive their education as, essentially, an *input* (experiences) – *output* (skills) system.

But, of course, there is no essential "link" between any activity, skill and course; rather, students must fabricate this "link".

6.4.3. Skills as 'Floating Signifiers'

Skills act as a set of overt symbols for students to perform their capability, suitability and demonstrate emergent academic socialisation. However, as noted, there is no essential "link" between any experience, skill and undergraduate course. Rather, students' articulations of themselves in term of skills, in this context, are performative fabrications. Judith Butler (1990, pp. 136) writes:

> "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications*" (*emphasis in original*)

Ball (2000, pp. 9) cites this quote from Butler (1990) and adds:

> "However, *as Butler is swift to point out such fabrications are paradoxical, and deeply so*. In one sense, [sic] […] fabrications are an escape from the gaze*,* a strategy of impression management that in effect erects a facade of calculation. But in another sense the work of fabricating […] requires submission to the rigours of performativity and the disciplines of competition […]. It is, as we have seen, a betrayal even, a giving up of claims to authenticity […] it is an investment in plasticity. Crucially and invariably acts of fabrication and the fabrications themselves act and reflect back upon the practices they stand for. The fabrication becomes something to be sustained, lived up to."

In response to the perceived "difficulties" mentors see in students' ability to identify the skills they are assumed to develop through their studies, some advised students to consult the various skills displays around the college (*shown earlier*) thought to help them, not simply better identify the skills they were already assumed to possess, but also, alert them to the ways they *should* understand themselves and the products of their learning. However, what I find most telling about the artefacts shown earlier, particularly listing the 'top 10 employability skills', is their essential emptiness as meaningfully stand-alone signifiers.

For instance, based on unarticulated assumptions about the study of languages, the Modern Foreign Languages department crystallised a set of skills into a display board students were invited to read both as the essential competencies required for study/work in these fields *and* the technical products they will 'make' by studying Languages. However, these are not specific to Modern Foreign Languages but are, in fact, the same '10 Top employability skills' shown in the large display cited earlier (*Fig. 4.0. and 4.1.*), which were also recycled in various other displays around the campus. Thus, the 'relevance' and 'value' of any skill depends on the academic-disciplinary context in which they are situated, not the nature of the skill itself. Skills may only gain meaning and therefore value when a specific knowledge-practice context is invoked providing an intelligible interpretive backdrop able to accord these with pertinence.

In fact, skills in themselves say very little without context. To me, this highlights how skills are floating signifiers around nodal points of academic-disciplinary discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The relative success of students' performances of "the person […] they want you to be" are thus dependent in large measure on how well they make sense of the expectations/requirements of the gatekeepers and make themselves *fit* through strategic articulations of relevant skills*.*

Consider Daniels' (1975) thoughts on the skill of analysis, cited by Court (1990, pp. 265):

> "If we choose a sufficiently narrow range of things to […] analyse, we may be able to identify particular activities to do and exercises to practise to develop the relevant facilities. Thus, chemical technicians learn certain routines for synthesizing products. These routines are procedures that can be learned as strings of facilities, and trainees can thus become skilful analysts, evaluators, and so on. *But there can be no general skill of analysing or evaluating because criteria differ from one area of analysis to another*." (pp. 253, *my emphasis*)

There can be no "general skill" of analysing because what constitutes valued skill in analysis varies from one activity and/or discipline to another. Court (*ibid*, pp. 266) adds "[i]t is clear that context is important" which perhaps highlights the discursive necessity of the various prefixes that frequently accompany 'skills', like: "subject-specific skills", "academic skills" (FN28, pp. 39) "laboratory skills", "analytical skills", "literacy skills" (FN19, pp. 7), "general study skills" (FN2, pp. 17) or 'life skills'. These prefixes could point to nodal points in the discursive system around which the floating signifier of '…skill' gains sense and value. Without context, Court (*ibid*) suggests, skills are not just "harmless misnomer[s]" but "inaccurate representations", supporting Ball's (2000) and Butler's (1990) notions of "fabrications". Court also claims skills talk are suggestive of certain neo-liberal approaches to teaching and learning which emphasise the performative, technical and instrumental character of education corresponding with their dominant rationalities and governmentalities.

It seems the communicative-denotative power of skills is achieved exactly through their essentially empty and floating nature. They are "zombie categories" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, pp. 203),

evidenced by the fact they appear more as absorbers rather than emitters of meaning. Skills have no definitive or essential connection to a discipline or programme of study. Rather, this "link" must be fabricated.

6.4.4. "Standing out from the crowd"

This phrase and idea, more so than any other, recurred in the data on personal statements. It was invoked to describe what students should ultimately be doing in their personal statement: (make yourself) *stand out from the crowd*.

In this final section, I examine the over-riding imperative to 'stand out from the crowd' as it relates to the myriad of conventions, rules and performative exigencies structuring students' understanding and approach to writing a personal statement. In the same senses as calls to "be original!", "standing out from the crowd" may only happen in highly limited and contrived ways if a student is to be successful. Though, again, like 'being original' and 'don't copy', 'standing out' may not be what students are being encouraged to do.

In analysing this idea, I identified a recurrent theme related to beliefs about the competitiveness of undergraduate admissions and the potential differentiation of applicants. Below is a selection of extracts highlighting beliefs regarding competition that, I feel, underpin the imperative to "stand out from the crowd":

> "…the personal statement is *what separates you from everyone else.*" (Andrea, Pastoral Mentor, FN2, pp. 18, *my emphasis*)

> "…there's more of a need now for students to stand out; to make themselves stand out […] unless they've done something weird or spectacular, they're not going to stand out." (Lisa, Pastoral Mentor, FN10, pp. 42)

> "So, in terms of prestigious universities and courses, I've just put together a list of the Russell Group universities for you to look at […] and this is the league table of all

the universities, and as you can see they're not all affiliated to the Russell Group, but this just gives you an idea of the most prestigious universities. *It is highly competitive*. […] I'm going to be talking to you a little bit about applications to Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science. […] As it currently stands, *there is a 1 in 14 chance of students getting an interview for any of those subjects. Once at interview that falls to a 1 in 6 chance so you can see how competitive it is from that particular statistic*. […] and *obviously because those courses are so competitive we want to make sure that all the students have absolutely everything in there that's gonna make them stand out.*" (Christine, Pastoral Mentor/A-Level Head of Studies, FN28, pp. 40; 43)

"…*obviously because courses are so competitive we want to make sure that all students have absolutely everything on there that's gonna make them stand out* […] as I say, making them stand out and giving them that *added x-factor.*" (Christine, Pastoral Mentor/A-Level Head of Studies, FN28, pp. 128-129, *my emphasis*)

"The personal statement is your opportunity to say why you really, really want to do this course *and if you think – there's lots of other students from around the country applying for the same course – so, it's about making yourself stand out.*" (Carla, FN21, pp. 70, *my emphasis*)

"I called up Newcastle Uni to see what exactly are they looking for, you know? […] *'cos there'll probably be hundreds of students with 4 A's, so you've really got to have those extra things to make you stand out* […] they told me, 'something different' – that was it!".'" (Sharon, Student Services Staff, FN12, pp. 44, *my emphasis*)

"It's [*i.e. communicating interest and motivation*] the subtext of everything basically, but like, you have to put it in such a way that it *makes you stand out. You have to […] say what makes you different from everyone else.*" (IT1Maria – BC/ME, pp. 15, *my emphasis*)

"Are you attractive to a university? How could you make your personal statement stand out? […] *it tells the admissions officer why to pick you, over you!*" (James, Pastoral Mentor, FN2, pp. 10, *my emphasis*)

Physically embodying beliefs about the competitiveness of admissions, the last extract came from James and was delivered during a Pastoral Tutor Group class as he pointed to two girls in the front row: "it tells the admissions tutor *why to pick you, over you!*".

As evident in the extracts above, a significant 'felt need' for students to (*make themselves*) "stand out" were assumptions about the competitiveness of undergraduate admissions and the limited possibility for differentiation between students' with similar achievements, skills and experiences, studying the same A-Levels, perhaps in the same schools, and applying for the same courses.

Add to this the fact all students work under the 'expert' guidance of their mentors who themselves work to a standardised curriculum. Because of this, there is an intractable homogeneity to the information, advice and resources students receive and use – evident in the simulacra of originality discussed earlier. Even more simplistically still, there are many more students than A-Levels such that there will be an unavoidable degree of overlap among students helping us to make sense of the need for students to (*make themselves*) "stand out".

Consider Grace's thoughts, echoing Maria's (*above: extract 7*), in this regard:

> "*You gotta be different!* […] you've gotta have better, different experiences to other people, 'cos lots of people will have the same kinds of experiences […] and like, even similar lifestyles, so maybe you gotta do something extra, go the extra mile […] do something extreme […] something rare […] maybe you'll stand out more" (IT1Grace – BC/ME, pp. 2, *my emphasis*)

Grace brings into sharp relief the challenging, paradoxical position all students find themselves in – "lots of people will have the same kinds of experiences […] even similar lifestyles", and therefore will likely have same kinds of qualifications, experiences and skills to draw on meaning "[y]ou gotta be different!". But, students must also "mould" and fit themselves to "what they're looking for", which is enough to say: *don't be (too) different!*

More than this, however, and highlighting the need for students to produce their own competitiveness, Grace says: "you gotta have *better* […] experiences"; "maybe you gotta do something extra, go the extra mile", "do something extreme", "something rare" to "stand out *more".* Grace's use of the words "extreme" and "rare", I think, are noteworthy.

Rarity implies scarcity, and usually denotes value, i.e. *'a diamond in the rough'*, *'gold dust'*, *'pearl in the oyster'* (or *'common as muck'*). Rarity can also mean being unusually remarkable or exceptional. In both interpretations, the point is clear; being different makes one more valuable. And, in the context of (what they are told are) highly competitive admissions, it is obvious how finding ways of demonstrating your 'rarity' are thought of as practices to secure advantageous positioning to better 'stand out'.

"[E]xtreme" adds another layer to this reading. In a simple sense, "extreme" corresponds with rarity. However, an "extreme" can be thought of as the furthest point from a centre or given point still within a finite area, i.e. being at the very limit of something while still technically 'inside' it. In this sense, Grace's reference to the need to do "something extreme" might highlight students' responsibility to "*make themselves* stand out" while always remaining within a certain bandwidth of acceptable performances; that is, being different, but not *too* different.

In this sense, I have come to believe the imperative to 'stand out from the crowd' actually points to the exact opposite; it is "simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1994/1981) alike calls to be 'original' or not to copy, or even the very label *personal* statement that appears to be a total misnomer. Remember, "*they want a certain type of individual*", and the students' job is to be that, thus calling into question whether "standing out *from* the crowd" is a desirable objective at all.

During the "Oxbridge Applicant Day", Christine instructed students to swap their personal statements and provide feedback to one another. Her introductory description of the task brings this idea into focus:

> "…see can you identify 2-3 things that make your personal statement stand out […] things that when people like Helen [*i.e. admissions tutor*] get your personal statement, that, *what are the little things that make you stand out. Things that are a little bit different.*" (Christine, FN15, pp. 48, *my emphasis*)

The idea, I believe, is to 'stand out *in* the crowd', not be so different that you "stand out *from* the crowd". The idea is to be "a *little bit different*" within a narrow range of acceptable performances. Students must walk a performative tightrope attempting to fabricate their difference and competitiveness, but which threatens to knock them off if they go too far.

Helen, the 'Oxbridge' representative Christine refers to above, commented:

> "…*you don't need to try and stand out by doing something quirky or wacky*. You wanna stand out by the things that you've done and the interests you have. You want to make a tutor read it and says 'oh, this is someone I really want to talk to' *for a good reason and not for a bad reason, because they might be a maniac or something* [*laughter*]. So, if you are a quirky or wacky person then go for it, I'm sure your personal statement will be a true and accurate reflection of that but if you're just putting something in to try and stand out try, then, to think about some other ways you can stand out, maybe more in a more positive way." (Helen, Oxbridge Representative, FN15, pp. 51, *my emphasis*)

Students can stand out in two ways: "for a good reason" or "for a bad reason". To me, this is better understood as 'standing out *in* the crowd' and 'standing out *from* the crowd' respectively. The former is showing how exceptional and valuable you are relative to certain normative expectations among many like propositions. The latter is marking yourself out as different – '*sticking out like a sore thumb*'. Paying attention to the language Helen uses, she advises students not to do something "quirky or wacky" as this might mark you out as a "maniac"; maybe a 'basket-case' or an 'alien'. The

nod "if you are a quirky or wacky person", then, seems like insincere lip service to students' individuality. Instead, students are told to "stand out […] in a more positive way" suggesting there is a 'right' way to do this and, as such, students should be wary of being *too* different, of being "quirky or wacky"; of "standing out" *too much*.

Implicitly, these messages converge for students to learn they should 'stand out *in* the crowd', not *from* it. The more a student deviates from the assumed conventions of the personal statement and expectations of the 'ideal' student, the more 'original' they are, the more "quirky or wacky" they show themselves to be, the more likely it is they will make themselves stand out "for a bad reason". The hidden message, then, is: *do and be the same as everyone else!*

Mark (*Student*) attended Helen's "Oxbridge Applicant Day" and noted some of the ways a student could stand out "for a bad reason" by breaking with the assumed rules and conventions, such as the use of formal, discipline-specific language to make one "sound smart":

> Mark: "…you need your personal statement to make them think 'I want to meet this person' […] if you go for the most normally used words possible then your personal statement won't stand out […] especially if you're applying to universities where there are lots of applicants per place." (IT1MD – BC/ME, pp. 197)

Caroline also signposted her students to the importance of the type of language used, the sentiments expressed and the potential perceptual implications which could follow – echoing Carla's advice students should always keep in mind, "*what does this say about me as a person?*" (FN21, pp. 73):

> "I suggest staying away from phrases like 'so my views and opinions can be developed to shape the world of tomorrow'. They are phrases that a lot of people include and so will not necessarily make your statement stand out" (Caroline comment on Rachel's 2nd draft personal statement, MSA1:PS/RM –BC/ME, pp. 35–50)

Again, we can see how discourses of competition undergird advice to 'stand out'. Importantly, Caroline highlights one way a student could stand out "for a bad reason" – the use of clichéd or 'idealistic' expressions. Throughout fieldwork, I became particularly interested in the raft of these folkloric style 'rules' governing personal statement writing; the "crimes" that would make one stand out for a "bad reason" like Penny's use of quotes earlier. Even deviation from norms of course choices marked students out in a 'bad' way.

Firstly, students were told to avoid the statements to the effect, '*From a young age, I have always...*', which showed you were unoriginal (perhaps even plagiarising) and disingenuous. "No, you haven't! No, you haven't; you haven't wanted to be an accountant from you were 6 years old!" (Andrea, Pastoral Mentor, FN2b, pp. 55) as one mentor said, echoing the UCAS video narrator's comments earlier.

Secondly, underscoring Mark's comments above, students were expected to use appropriate formal, discipline-specific language to 'sound smart' and like a capable student but not be too verbose as this could be seen as "arrogant" (Narrator, UCAS Video, FN39, pp. 175). Students were also told to vary their language but told not use the thesaurus tool on Microsoft Word in case they fell foul of an antonym when they wanted a synonym, marking them out as careless and 'stupid'. Students were told to communicate their passion and enthusiasm without actually using those words as this would signal they were unimaginative, poor writers and, ironically, *lacked passion*.

There were even informal 'rules' about how much of the 4,000 character limit students should use. Andrea told her class, "if you don't use all the space in your personal statement, *they'll think you haven't got very much to say and you haven't maximised the opportunity*" (FN3-BC/ME, pp. 46-47) – itself a "crime" for the responsibilised student obliged to take and 'maximise opportunities' they create or encounter to produce their own competitiveness. And, there were a host of other folkloric

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style rules (i.e. more *balancing acts*) such as advice not to use contractions but to be economic with characters where possible. And, as we can appreciate given the analyses thus far, the possibility for deviating the vast number of conventions and 'rules' of the game are vanishingly small, even if there are ways of gently subverting them by creatively and strategically satisfying them; 'gaming the game'. *Everything* "say[s] something about me as a person" and students need to be mindful of the interpretive implications following from what they say, how much they say and how they say it, thus encouraging strategy and tactic in the fabrication of performances.

One of the most interesting pieces of advice mentors gave students, in the context of 'standing out', was to "read around" in their chosen subject areas. By referring to having read things beyond the mandatory A-Level curriculum relevant to ones' course choices, students could demonstrate passion, interest and enthusiasm for the subject and their devotion to learning by showing they went *beyond* what was basically required in their formal studies. During the "Oxbridge Applicant Day", Neil – an Engineering applicant – said that to "stand out", he could "talk about reading an engineering magazine" that he felt demonstrated he was up to date with the field and showed he was keen, enthusiastic and passionate about the subject beyond his A-Level studies. In this sense, Neil was also performing an aspect of his academic-disciplinary socialisation signalling his "disposition to be, and […] become" (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 100) an engineer.

Carla also highlighted the expectation, and positive effects of, 'reading around':

> "So, *another thing that they would like to see is that you do some wider reading and you keep up to date*. So, for business it could be look at The Guardian Business pages online you know, or a current article on there, you might have a look once a week, it's not that they want you to be an expert or give loads of examples but [*that*] you do some wider reading to keep your knowledge up to date" (FN21, pp. 72*, my emphasis*)

When Carla's description is read in conjunction with Hayley's below, we can see how 'reading around' can be an effective means of 'standing out *in* the crowd':

> "Well, what are the odds two students will have read the same, like, pinpointed the same article in a particular book, and interpreted it for themselves, like, the odds are quite slim… unless it's a pretty mainstream book or something studied on A-Levels." (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 17)

All students were encouraged to "read around" so this could be deployed in the personal statement to positive effect. Though this undeniably gives the activity a highly-performative, somewhat inauthentic quality – reminiscent of Stephen's "fake passion" earlier. Students differentiate themselves within this widely expected activity through the infinitude of literature available on any given subject, i.e. stand out *in* the crowd. "Standing out *from* the crowd", on this reading, would be not 'reading around' to show your passion at all.

This kind of tactical advice, I think, highlights just how contrived, inauthentic, impersonal and performative the personal statement necessarily is. Take for instance Caroline's "hints & tips" to her students "about things you can technically do over the summer break that will add to your personal statement and make writing it so much easier" of which "reading around your subject area" was central (FN4, pp. 53). She stated "it doesn't need to be a massive law textbook; it doesn't need to be anything major. Books about computing, law, finance, business, etc.". However, she advised them to "make sure it's not too complicated" and ensure it is "well referenced and well grounded" (*ibid*), i.e. 'academic'. Importantly, and highlighting the performativity (*in a Lyotardian sense, as efficiency/effectiveness*) underpinning this advice*,* while Caroline advised her students to read books, more than one even, she encourages a tactical approach. She notes that if a student mentions a book, or issue raised therein, and they are subsequently called to interview that they should be prepared to talk at length and in depth about it. Shrewdly, then, she suggests it would be far less risky (and elicit the same effect) to "limit it to one or two chapters" (FN4, pp. 58). The logic being that,

if a student focuses on only "one or two chapters" (as opposed to a whole book) then there are much fewer questions they could be asked if called to interview which would "make your job easier" (*ibid*). This is quite obviously a type of strategic/tactical performance to demonstrate ("fake") passion and emergent academic-disciplinary socialisation; perhaps performing '*how keen I am*' or '*look how I go the extra mile'* to paraphrase Grace.

But, this is a quite obviously artificial activity undertaken strategically for students to perform themselves satisfactorily for admissions tutors. And, when all students are advised to read around and perform themselves in these ways, the ones who do not 'read around' are the ones who "stand out *from* the crowd".

In essence, then, "standing out *from* the crowd" is not what students are being encouraged to do at all; rather, all are required to play the same game as everyone else to 'stand out *in* the crowd' and show they are, more or less, like everyone else. This, I feel, lends added credence to the imperative for students to "mould" (IT2Caroline – LJMU – BC/ME, pp. 32-33*, my emphasis*) themselves to the "person they want you to be". This is not a *personal* statement in the purest sense of the word 'personal'. Universities "want *a* certain type of individual" and the students' job is to perform themselves accordingly thus funnelling each and all into a homogenous bandwidth of tolerable/accpetable performances. Paradoxically, the strategies and tactics forming the appropriate ways of making oneself "stand out *from* the crowd" 'in a good way' to address competitiveness, unproblematically encouraged in all students, themselves foster the kind of homogenisation acting against that imperative and acting on students' already assumed individuality. Thus, all the "shading of individual difference" (Foucault, 1977/1995, pp. 184) can be plotted in a general register marking out "the permitted and the forbidden, the desirable and the undesirable" (Rose, 1996, pp. 153), the acceptable and not.

7.1. The A-level Mindset

As fieldwork progressed and I started to formally interview pastoral mentors, and other college staff, I became interested in the college's latest "Teaching & Learning Theme", known as *the A-Level Mindset* (or, more specifically, *Brook Mindset*). Every two years the college sets a strategic teaching and learning 'theme', or agenda, as the over-arching pedagogical focus of the college. To provide some context: some of the college's previous 'themes' included "*Aim Higher*", "*Higher Still*", "*Excellence Everywhere*" and "*ACE*" (i.e. *Assessment, Creativity and Employability* – the ill-fated employability initiative noted in Personal Statement chapters) loosely tracking educational policy (at the time). In a general sense, the college sets a pedagogical 'theme' in order to provide a common sense of purpose to the college's activities and mission. Basically speaking, 'themes' are designed to continuously work towards improvement primarily in the form of improving student performance and progress which, vicariously, reflects *Brook College*'s own performance and progress as an institution while also addressing other, non-curricular, pastoral issues given pertinence by the college.

At the time of this research, the college was in the process of moving from their previous 'theme', "*Excellence Everywhere*", to *The A-level Mindset* based largely on the teacher companion book of the same name by Steve Oakes & Martin Griffin (2016). Christine, one of the college's two 6th form Heads of Studies and a primary architect of *Brook College*'s adoption and implementation of A-Level Mindset, explained:

> "We've got a college theme. The college-wide theme [*at the moment*] is Excellence Everywhere. That tends to now be a two-year theme […] though […] once the two-years is up it's not as if, 'that was two years ago'. It's almost as if, 'well that's embedded now'. […] [*Now we're using*] A-Level mindset and VESPA as our teaching and learning theme and […] it does seem to be quite universally adopted now across the college. […] it's our approach to students." (LT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 16-17)

The A-Level Mindset book (Oakes & Griffin, 2016), as Christine says, is structured by the acronym "VESPA" which denotes the programme's 5 core elements: "*Vision", "Effort", "Systems", "Practice"* and "*Attitude".* The generic "A-Level Mindset" title was institutionally specified as "*Brook Mindset"* and the "VESPA" model was adopted as their over-arching pedagogical approach. Since then, however, as I prepared to leave the field, Christine explained the college was already underway installing its newest 'theme', namely, "RAP": "*Relationships, Assessment & Progress"* – based again, largely, on the best-selling book "*Motivating Unwilling Learners in Further Education: the key to improving behaviour*" by Susan Wallace (2017).

The A-Level Mindset – as a substantive analytic-interpretive element of this research – only emerged through iterative data collection and analysis, although I had noticed the book sitting on Jason's desk on my very first visits to the college (FN3–BC/ME, *23/6/16*). As I progressed, I became increasingly aware of the preeminent position the A-Level Mindset occupied in the college's institutional consciousness and pedagogy.

Early on in participant observations I heard various staff use the term 'mindset' (and 'resilience') more and more. This was, firstly, in passing and then in more formal ways given the formal adoption of the "VESPA" model in the everyday pedagogic life of the college. As participant observations increasingly gave way to formal interviewing, I began to ask senior leaders, mentors, other staff and students about this new initiative. From these conversations, my confusion and curiosity heightened. I went back over previously collected data again, in a new light, and felt I formed a keener sense of the central importance Mindset and "VESPA" seemed to occupy in the college. I did not intend or think, at the outset at least, I would focus on pedagogical-pastoral matters of this kind. However, it became clear I could not ignore it.

My analytic interest in the A-Level Mindset stemmed from initial impressions of its largely behavioural, performative focus on enhancing student performance by focusing on student "commitment, motivation and productivity" alongside "character" and "resilience" (Oakes & Griffin,

2016). I acquired a copy of the book and was struck by its highly-systematic, explicitly neuroscientific and psychologised approach to teaching and learning, its conceptions of 'success' and its clear claim to be "*the* solution" (*ibid*, pp. 8, *my emphasis*) to a range of 'problems' related to students' performance, based on "VESPA" categories. Beyond explicating each category and offering a range of associated development activities, the book also deploys the notions of "character" and "resilience". One of the last sections of the book discusses "coaching", and encourages staff employing the A-Level Mindset programme/"VESPA" model in their own institutions to "embed a coaching culture" (*ibid*, pp. 124) through adoption of a "coaching framework" in their use of "VESPA" specified in the book.

In the analytic-interpretive accounts that follow, I take a selection of the 'core' elements of the A-Level Mindset programme and "VESPA" model as starting points and explore their significance relative to the college's practices to support students' completion of their A-levels and progressions into HE. In the first section, I examine "*Vision*". I explore "vision", its associated pedagogical strategies and practices, as a technological response to problematisations among college staff that students lacked motivation due to not having longer-term life goals to guide their (educational) decision making. Then, complicating this line of interpretation further, I discuss the technological practice of *self-vision* evident in a range of self-reflective and target-setting activities students are routinely obliged to undertake throughout their studies.

Following this, then, I turn to focus on the idea of "resilience" which appears to be becoming an increasingly common-place concept in society in general, and especially in mainstream educational discourses (*see* Burman, 2018; Gill & Orgard, 2018; McGreavy, 2016; Chandler, 2014; Zebrowski, 2013; Joseph, 2013; Yaeger & Dweck, 2012; Morales, 2008; Morrison & Allen, 2007). The general idea of "resilience", and its endorsed practices to support development of 'persistence', 'perseverance' and/or "self-discipline" at *Brook College* represent a response to a series of deficit problematisations of students relative to their academic performance and learning

behaviours/practices. Many pastoral mentors referred to a "culture of entitlement" among contemporary students that they felt contributed to passivity, a lack of independence and responsibility that led, in turn, to a lack of resilience in the form of 'systems' and 'strategies' students were presumed to need to structure their learning to support continued performance and progress. In conjunction with "vision" and "character", I argue "resilience" becomes a "technology of the self" (Rose, *et al.*, 2006) employed to more fully responsibilise students with their own academic performance, progress, (enduring) success and psychological well-being in a high-stakes, performative context. The overall 'target', I believe, is the production of fully autonomous/autonomised, deeply individualised and responsibilised learner-subjects who are equipped with the means to identify and respond to their own 'lacks' through a range of pedagogical, psychological and behavioural "tricks and tactics" (FN34a – BC/ME, pp. 31) that allow them to continually bring themselves (back) 'into line' and improve.

7.2. (The technology of) "Vision"

Throughout their time at *Brook College*, mentors, teachers and hosts of other adults encourage students to develop a long(er)-term life plan of which HE is positioned as the next/first 'step'. Students are encouraged to think about what they wish to do in the future, where they wish to 'end up' and who they wish to be in order to inform their thinking about HE. This kind of existential musing about who, what and where students want to be and do in the future seems to be widely regarded (by adults at least) as the essential kind of thinking necessary to be able to make 'informed decisions' about HE.

However, being 'informed' in this sense is much more than processing pertinent information regarding HE – as with dominant conceptualisations in educational policy. Being 'informed', rather, means being suitably 'informed' about *oneself*; about who students think they are, what they do and who they wish to become. As the Philosophy tutor who delivered an "academic support" session on the subject of "Ambition" noted: the most important thing for students is to "*know thyself*" (FN46, pp. 5). This kind of existential thinking and personal reflection, so the dominant understanding goes, plays out in students' decisions regarding HE which, it is assumed, significantly shapes their future career decisions and employment options. Only by knowing "thyself", it seems, can students begin to answer the question: *what do you want to do (after college)?*

The cumulative message is that for students to be able to make 'informed decisions' about HE (and by virtue, the rest of their lives) they need to have a "vision" *of* themselves and *for* life. "Vision" is one of the five central elements of the A-Level Mindset programme/"VESPA" model and was considered by many staff at *Brook College* to be its most important.

I believe "vision" can be understood in two distinct but ultimately connected ways. In the most basic sense, having "vision" is simply understood as developing a motivating life goal (or set of contingent life goals) set in a longer-term life plan. This is how college staff most commonly spoke about "vision". However, more profoundly, I believe "vision" also refers to a certain strategic, ethical and

practical relation of *self to the self* students are encouraged to adopt as an implied condition of the realisation of their life plan/s. Through a panoply of practices and techniques of self-reflection, students are provided with the tools to 'look' at themselves along the "VESPA" categories to identify their 'lacks', and on the basis of this pre-structured self-knowledge, understand how they need to work on themselves to improve performance.

7.2.1. "Vision" as having a goal: *intrinsic motivation and a "burning sense" of purpose*

For mentors, students developing an idea of a long(er)-term life goal, or target – *a "vision"* – was essential to guide their decision making, firstly in HE and, in turn, in a contingent career choice. More than this though, students having a goal for life or target for their future was thought to be inherently motivating. The prevailing wisdom goes that: by constructing an attractive life goal *for oneself*, students become (more) motivated to achieve this *for themselves*. One's "vision" is constructed as the students' desired destination in life, and they are motivated to want that because, after all, it is their own. Relative to motivation, the notion of 'ownership' is important; that is, students will have greater ownership of the learning process when they are the architects of their own vision. Viewing vision as a destination implying forward/upward movement perhaps also offers some interpretive sense to terms often used in the college and major policy documents referring to students' matriculation through stages of education and into the world of work like: progressions, destinations, transitions, pathways, futures, routes, trajectories, etc.

Of course, understanding the motivating power of goal formation in this way is not new. It relies on a borrowed reading of theories of motivation in Psychology which suggest that to be(come) more motivated, a person needs to have clear, achievable, realistic and desirable goals to direct agency (*see* Deci, *et al.* (1991)). This understanding supports the now highly common practice of "SMART" target setting, i.e. *Specific*, *Measurable*, *Achievable*, *Relevant* and *Timely,* for students in schools and

colleges*.* Furthermore, when goals are formed by oneself, i.e. are not externally imposed, people are thought to develop a greater sense of *intrinsic* motivation; that is, self-generated, self-propelling animus. Zimmerman (2008), a notable theorist (and advocate) of target-setting to produce 'self-regulated' learners, proposes 8 criteria for productive target setting, noting especially targets should be "self-generated" (cited in: Day & Tosey, 2011, pp. 518). Zimmerman (2002, pp. 65-66) elsewhere contends, "learners are proactive in their efforts to learn because […] they are guided by personally set goals". This re-packaging of well-worn psychological understandings in education is apparent in the obvious 'scientific' rationality and approaches of the A-Level Mindset book which cite many psychological studies in an effort to lend scientific legitimacy to its model and approaches – much in the same ways as Burman (2018) highlights the gaps and omissions in the corroborating scientific sources used to legitimise the *Character & Resilience Manifesto*. At *Brook College* it was thought students would develop greater levels of intrinsic motivation if they were encouraged to develop longer-term life goals furnishing them with a sense of ownership and purpose. A(n educational) raison d'être*,* if you will.

The following extracts are characteristic of how mentors articulated the necessity of having "vision" to develop high levels of intrinsic motivation and a driving sense of purpose:

> Christine: "…V for Vision, if you start with that with a student, I always try […] it's really useful to start with, 'right, *what do you hope to achieve? What do you want to be? What do you want to do after college?'* Quite a few of the times, they haven't got a clue, and you think, well, *there's a starting point. We need to work on that for them individually a bit, and let's get them a bit more motivated* […] It gives them a bit more of a carrot." (*IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 21, my emphasis*)

> Caroline: "…if you've no idea, if you've no idea what you wanna do [*at university and in life*], you can't magically get motivation to want to go to uni... […] *if you don't have something to aim for, you're not necessarily going to be working at the highest motivation levels*" (*IT1Caroline – BC/ME, pp. 5, 8, my emphasis*)

"…first of all, students need a vision, they need clear goals for where they want to get to, and I do realise that that can be very hard at the age of 16 to think that 'God, I've no idea what I'm actually trying to achieve in the whole of my life'; we're not asking any student to have a whole life plan necessarily, they just need to have some targets that they are determined to reach, so these can be short-term as well as long-term and if they do have a long term goal, if they know what career they'd like to go into or what university they want to go to, then that's brilliant, that's highly motivating. If not, then, they just need a clear target that *will* motivate them." (Mr.Gray, Principal, Parents 'Welcome evening' introductory address, FN13b, pp. 12, *emphasis in original*)

The dominant wisdom was that students' educational performance was contingent on their motivation (and "determination") itself assumed conditional on possessing "vision" (or "a clear target") to act as an incentivising "carrot". The necessity of "vision" and its relation to motivation is clear in the data for, as Caroline notes, students cannot hope to be "working at the highest motivation levels" unless they have "that *plan for the future*" and "*something to aim for*". A member of student services staff, Sally, discussed a common strategy used with individuals perceived to be struggling to make HE decisions, whereby students are encouraged to "work backwards" from a desired end-goal:

"So, you know, we'd ask, *what direction do you want to go? Have you got a career aspiration? What do you want to be? You might work backwards thinking, right, do you need a degree for that job? If so, what degree is it you need?* Then we would do some research in terms of universities and courses." (IT1Sally – BC/ME, pp. 12, *my emphasis*)

The logic of this strategy forges a deterministic relationship between present and future in terms of "direction" of travel. The ultimate destination, and presumably function, of going to university is clearly framed as employment here – "have you got a *career aspiration*? *What do you want to be*?". Inclusion of such questions also assumes a corresponding determinism between what one studies at university and what one does for a "career". They are also, I feel, a rather clear indication that HE choices are much more than decisions about what course to study, or even which career or

profession one wishes to pursue later in life. Invocations of being and *"to be",* following questions about "career aspirations", highlight the existential dimensions, and identity implications, of these choices. It is not coincidental, in this discursive context, that education and work are successively positioned as the fundamental stages for being (*living*) and crucial sites for the development of self. Indeed, we should note in the above extracts – *which so obviously implicate identity* – how the question is not '*who* do you want to be?', but, "*what* do you want to be?". Similarly, "career *aspiration*" I feel is noteworthy in these respects. "[A]spiration" discursively draws on ideas of desire, dreams, ambition and hopefulness, all of which implicate a self-generated, self-directed animus based on a personally appealing objective. Discursively framing it in these ways, students are moralised to understand a "career" is what one should ultimately *aspire* to as this is, at root, a (lifelong) project of the self.

Two other related ideas are invoked by Christine's expressions above: "for them *individually*" and "*carrot*". As Christine explains, asking "what do you want to be?" is something which can only be 'worked on' "individually" by the student, but importantly, under the guidance of their (expert) mentor ("…work on that *for them*"). Everyone is unique, and everyone's life goals will be person specific. Only a student can develop their own "vision" for if this is externally imposed, they will have a limited sense of ownership and will fail to produce *their own* motivation. Caroline (Pastoral Mentor), during interview, described her role in supporting students crafting their own "vision", and how this related to ownership, commitment and motivation, stating:

> "…it should be more it's coming from them […] it's trying to get them to own it a bit more. By putting them in the driving seat, they tend to be a little more accepting of it." (IT1Caroline – BC/ME, pp. 7)

Where, what and who students wish to be in the future is framed as the coveted prize *they chose* for themselves; the aim, then, is not necessarily motivating students, but for students to produce their

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own motivation and become *self-motivated* by putting "them in the driving seat" and obliging "them

to own it". Ansgar Allen (2012a, pp. 13) notes:

> "...the disciplinary administration of talent now appears hopelessly utopian in its
> designs, *making it necessary to create a substructure of motivated (rather than*
> *disciplined) individuals.*" (*my emphasis*)

Students are encouraged to foster for themselves personal responsibility and accountability for the

long-term outcomes of their life in this way. Through the technology of "vision", students are

responsibilised with/for the production of their own (educational) motivation. And, when motivation

is framed as a primary determinant of academic performance, students are responsibilised with/for

the production of their own educational successes (and failures). It is easy to appreciate how

performance in A-Level examinations can assume profound (existential) weight far beyond academic

achievement in this discursive context. The stakes involved, particularly final exams, then, become

much more than getting good grades to get into university. More significantly, this discourse invites

students to think of their future successes (or failures) as ultimately conditional upon what they do

now in the "perpetual educational present"; "a foreshortened, individualised time, by decreased

angle of vision and a focus on the educational present" whereby "*every moment becomes a moment*

of potential educational significance." (Allen, 2012a, pp. 13, *my emphasis*). Indeed, during piloting of

this study, I spoke to an A-Level student, Frances, who commented:

> "...you can't worry so far in the future, but like you can worry about exams because
> they're so imminent [...] that's got to be the detailed focus now" (IT3Frances, pp. 37-
> 38)

Present educational activities, especially exams, become positioned as the most primarily important

determining 'step' towards securing one's self-styled "vision". In this way, the focus on students'

futures collapses to an exclusive focus on the 'perpetual present'. Every educational activity and

decision, then, assumes profound significance where the absolute need for success at every turn

becomes ever more necessary if a student is to achieve their own "vision". This perhaps offers us some sense to the high-stakes, moral-ethical imperative for students to make the 'right' choices.

In this 'collapsed educational time' (Allen, 2012a), intrinsically motivating "vision" was understood as a key factor in students' current academic performance and ability to progress. It was common for staff to explain student under-performance, poor attendance or deficits in "effort" because students were unmotivated, lacked a guiding "vision" and accompanying raison d'être. In the A-Level Mindset book it states, as a matter of fact: "…without a goal or vision, students underperform by about one grade" – reinforcing the assumed causality of "vision", motivation and performance. Without a "magnetic" goal – as the book's author, Martin Griffin (hereafter MG) put it during his training presentation to college staff – "this *poor person* cannot find in themselves a kind of *burning sense of why they're doing any of this*" (FN34a, pp. 5, 7, *my emphasis*).

During interview, Caroline (mentor), discussed the problem of students who lack "vision":

> Caroline: "One of the things you talk about is vision, it's making sure you have that goal. *One of the reasons why someone may not be doing well at college is because they don't – they have no idea what they want to do, so they've got nothing to aim for. By bringing in A-Level Mindset and getting them to think 'This is what I want to do, I want to go and be a physicist and that' – or 'I want to go and get an apprenticeship in accounting', and then they can actually look and research what [course] they want [to do in more detail]. If they've got a thing that says, 'Right, you need to have two As and a B', then that gives them something to aim for. Then, in theory, other things should start falling into place*."
>
> R: "The vision part of VESPA is the main driver for you then?"
>
> Caroline: "Yeah" (ITCaroline1 – BC/ME, pp. 7-8, *my emphasis*)

Again, what one is 'aiming for' (in life) is framed in professional/career terms – "I want to go and be a physicist" – that subordinates higher education to an instrumental, service role in the pursuit of a career. Likewise, "I want to go and *be a physicist*", is somewhat ambiguous in its reference to a

university course *and* becoming a 'professional', again reifying work as a fundamental site and vehicle for self-making.

The implication in Caroline's talk also suggests that students without a vision are incapable of being motivated; they are "listless" (FN34a, pp. 7). Additionally, vision is, "in theory", an essential *a priori,* i.e. if one has vision, then, "other things should start falling into place". That is, "*if they have that thing… to aim for*", students are already assumed to possess the motivation deemed necessary to achieve it. In the extract, above, what a student is aiming for in the first instance is a HE course or training scheme framed professionally. However, these goals are then collapsed to a shorter-term educational target – "*'Right, you need to have two As and a B'"*. The implication here is that, no matter the long-term life goal/s, progress towards achieving them occurs through a series of smaller, incremental steps. This kind of atomisation of one's life plan focuses all energy and agency solely on the "perpetual educational present" (Allen, 2012a, pp. 13) as previously described. In the A-Level Mindset book, the authors suggest an activity to help develop a student's "vision" called "SMART goals" where students are encouraged to "chunk" large activities towards an "overall goal" (pp. 19):

> "*Start small. If we have an overall sense of why we're here and where we want to go, what do we need to achieve in the next fortnight?* […] In this goal-setting activity you are going to develop SMART goals – that is, *something concrete and doable which will help you achieve your goal* […] Try setting four or five SMART goals […] for example: a homework piece you want to complete really well, a part-time job application and interview you want to go smoothly, an upcoming test you want to perform well in, a section of notes you want to reorganise and revise." (*The A-Level Mindset*, Oakes & Griffin, 2016, pp. 19; 26-27, *my emphasis*)

Likewise, during his staff training presentation, MG, explained the benefit of shorter-term goal setting over longer-term, saying:

> MG: "This is how I used to think; short term, bad, long term, good. So, if you're working with a low vision student I'd be thinking, 'Right, what do you wanna do by the time you're 21? Let's do a kind of visualisation exercise about where you wanna

be when you're 30'… and it's flippin' hopeless! They don't know where they wanna be by Friday! The better thing to do, you pull it right back and you say, 'Next report goes home in 4 weeks time, what grades do you want on that report? And, what comments do you wanna see your teachers make about you? *Right, lets establish that, and then work out 3 or 4 steps now you can take that make that more likely. So, short term or long term… you know, shouldn't bother us, as long as we know why they're getting through the next month or two months.*" (FN34, pp. 7, *my emphasis*)

In this "goal-setting activity" the focus is solely on the present – "*pull it right back*" – where 'chunking' is encouraged to "help you achieve your [*larger*] goal" – "where you want to go"; "where you wanna be when you're 30?". Indeed, Zimmerman (2002, pp. 69) supports this technique arguing for "hierarchical goals […] with process goals leading to outcome goals in succession". Importantly, too, these 'chunks' are "concrete" and "doable" activities *right now*, as opposed to the long-term pursuit of one's "vision".

MG also described another activity called "Energy Line" that encouraged students to chunk and prioritise tasks based on how much energy was needed to complete them on time. The benefit, he commented, was that "for the first time ever, these students are now making *strategic decisions* about where to place their energy […] *for the first time, these students are living in next week.*" (FN34a, pp. 19-22*, my emphasis*) highlighting the essential futuritivity of present activity.

7.2.2. Deficit/s

While many instances of student under-performance were understood on an assumed deficit of "vision", such judgements were not as clear cut as *have* or *have not* despite the A-Level Mindset book consistently categorising "high vision" and "low vision" (as well as "high effort"/"low effort", "high systems"/"low systems", etc.). It also appeared that too strong or myopic "vision" was equally problematic – in much the same ways as in the balancing act of course choices and tailoring the personal statement.

During an interview with Emma (Pastoral Mentor) we discussed students having a longer-term plan for life (*of which their education formed a crucial 'step'*) and what happens when plans break down usually as a result of receiving 'poor' examination results. Emma explains the "catch 22" necessity of having a plan but how too firm a plan, or too myopic a "vision", is also troublesome:

> Emma: "Yeah, definitely and I think - obviously we say to them [*on results day*] 'Your A Level [*results*], this is a shock' but then some of them have sat there crying and I go 'The world won't end if on results day if you get two Bs and a C. You'll still have to get up that morning, you'll still have to go and do something. You still need to just think about what else you're going to do.' I think that is part of it, is the fear… that having yourself set on one plan and then there's immense fear of it not going to plan. It's, well, loads of stuff doesn't go to plan. Everyone's had things that haven't gone to plan. […] It's hard… in some ways, we encourage them to have vision and a goal. It's sometimes a bit of a catch 22 where we're going, 'what do you want to do' – do research, da, da, da… they get their heart set on going to Manchester or doing Physiotherapy or whatever. It's great, yeah, have that vision, get through you're A-Levels, aim really high. Then, at the same time, we're like, '…but it might not work out so, da, da, da…'. So, it's like that balance between the two of going 'Yeah, it's great you've got that [*vision*]' but a bit of reality as well I suppose." (IT1Emma – BC/ME, pp. 16-17, *my emphasis*)

Emma's final expression – "*a bit of reality*" – I believe, highlights the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of student performance; or perhaps the 'fantasy' element of relying on the certainty of the outcome of future plans. And, this sub-textual acknowledgement helps bring into sharp focus the A-Level Mindset author's modification of "magnetic" (FN34a, pp. 5) goals later in his staff presentation to "*flexible*, magnetic goal*s*" (FN34a, pp. 9). Ideas of flexibility, adaptability and plasticity of self and goals were apparent in mentors' advice for students to also develop "back-up plans" (FN2b, pp. 44) should things go wrong.

There is also something here that resonates with personal statement advice given by James to Penny. *To refresh*: Penny focused her personal statement completely on her (perhaps) 'myopic'

desire to study Psychology at Leeds Beckett, mentioning specific professors and citing their academic work. James suggested using this type of highly specific information was potentially 'alienating' because it was insufficiently general to 'be all things to all people'. In the same sense as Penny was *too specific*, almost *too certain*, having one's "heart set on" a singular vision and not being sufficiently "flexible" to bounce back when "stuff doesn't go to plan" is also deeply problematic.

Caroline noted how students can get locked into a problematic myopia on one course and/or institution (or profession/career) at the expense of flexibility and the exclusion of other options thereby failing to become the 'informed' choosers as they are expected to be:

> "Generally, the ones that have it in their head, 'Oh, I want to go and study Law at Manchester', they probably have not necessarily thought of all the different aspects. They've got their heart set on one course, one university, so they won't necessarily do the research and look at the other aspects of it. […] Often… *they can have blinkers on*." (IT1Caroline – BC/ME, pp. 27, *my emphasis*)

Again, having too myopic a "vision" and being too wedded to one idea ("got it in their head"; "got their heart set on one course, one university"), can be as problematic as lacking vision entirely. Students whose "vision" is too firmly fixed on one thing "have blinkers on". These individuals are seen as irresponsible, uninformed choosers in that they fail to devote the required consideration to "all the different aspects"; in fact, "they won't necessarily do the research" at all. There is a sense their choices are deliberately uninformed – a matter of will – responsibilising students through discourses of choice and essentialising research. It is ironic how the assumed telos of HE research is so that students gain certainty, here, is a problem. Now students are being *too certain* and this is problematic.

It seems, then, students are required to possess *a particular type* of "vision", focused but not too much lest they have 'blinkers on' and cannot adequately 'roll with the punches' when things do not go to plan. This kind of peril – the "immense fear" as Emma (Pastoral Mentor) described it – creates the logical need for flexible plans and goals which can change when things don't go well. Though,

more importantly, there is the embedded imperative to make *oneself* flexible. Fielding (1999, pp. 282), discussing aspects of the "policy pathology" for "SMART" target setting, states:

> "Singleness of purpose which provides target setting with its most sustainable and significant dynamic can also be [*one of*] its most significant limitation[*s*]: despite our best intentions, firmness can become dogma and intensity of conviction [*can*] harden into the fixed gaze of myopia."

7.2.3. A "future version of themselves": "Self-Realisation"

> MG*:* "…high vision students do outperform low vision students, students who know why they're on courses, what grades they want to get and why those grades are important to a future version of themselves […] Low vision students […] can't find a way to persuade themselves that it's worth the work" (FN34a, pp. 5)

In this section, I want to focus on one specific utterance in the above extract relative to the unfolding analysis of "vision" – a "*future version of themselves*".

I interviewed staff about their views on A-Level Mindset and Emma (Pastoral Mentor) stated:

> "What's good is in class, in lessons, is there's lots of *self-realisation* […] It's *making them really look at themselves and go, 'what am I doing or what haven't I got or what do I need to work towards'* […] but, it's that little bit, yes, putting them in [VESPA] categories I suppose and them going, 'Ah! This is my problem'…" (IT1Emma – BC/ME, pp. 3-4*, my emphasis*)

The products of this critical inward scrutiny, of "really look[*ing*] at themselves", it is implied, will generate knowledge about one's self, one's performance and areas of strength and weakness – "*what am I doing* […] *what haven't I got* […] *this is my problem*" – doubling as the formative orchestrator of strategic agency – "*what do I need to work towards*".

Returning to MG's opening sentiments about how one's (continued/continuing) academic performance is tied to the 'magnetism' of a "future version of themselves", we can get a better sense of how the concept of "self-realisation" is discursively constructed by mentors. "[V]ision",

then, also refers to a strategic relation of *self to the self* students are required to adopt to be able to pursue "self-realisation" to become that "future version of themselves".

Before attempting to deconstruct this idea and its associated practices, the notion of "self-realisation", to my mind, requires unpacking. Firstly, in context, the word "version" implies individuals possess some relatively stable identity and immutable core. "[V]ersion" also implies a particular form of something differing in key respects to another or earlier form, but which also possesses relatively enduring features. Likewise, it also suggests there may be different possibilities for who one may become making the result open to change and amenable to shaping. The "*future version* of themselves" students are asked to envisage, use as a guide and act towards becoming, in this context, is some enhanced or developed form of their current selves; the same in some respects, and different in others. Discursively, then, who a person *becomes* is necessarily contingent upon who they are now. These interpretations also provide some sense to the term '*progression*'. The "future version of themselves" is, in the same sense, a progression of who they are now.

Now, if we pick apart the term "self-realisation", we can appreciate what it suggests in context, its assumptions and how these shape associated practices. The term "realisation", here, is the fulfilment or achievement of a student's "vision" to become the "future version of themselves". Here "realisation" means to *real*-ise, i.e. acting to make (more) 'real' that "future version of themselves". The term also denotes the activity as a *process* with a definite, if not changeable, outcome. When the prefix "self-" is added another layer of meaning is introduced denoting both its agent and target; its subject *and* object. On the one hand, the "self" is the thing to be realised and, on the other hand, the "self" is the agent charged with and responsible for this process. Via pop-psychologised discourses of "self-realisation", students are locked into a moralising cycle responsibilising them for both process/es and outcome/s. As Rose (1996) states of the neoliberal conflation of the "enterprising self" (pp. 151) with notions of self: "we are condemned to make a project of our own identity" (pp. 160).

Students are then totally responsible *for* their own future selves by being responsible *to* their present selves and as such, are wholly to blame in the present for any future under-achievement. Caroline remarked how she communicates the gravity of her Pastoral Tutor Group Lessons, and echoes phrases used by MG in his training presentation:

> "I think putting that emphasis on, 'We are going to start talking about progressions now, *this is obviously to do with your future*.' [...] To be able to say, 'Actually, we're doing something really important in PT now'. It adds to that part of it as well […] *like, when we talk about this being really important* – because *it's actually important.*" (IT2Caroline – BC/ME, pp. 10, *emphasis in original*)

Likewise, another colleague of Emma and Caroline, James said:

> "…it's very important they start thinking about what they want to do in the future […] if they have that, even if it is just in the back of their mind as they go into the exam period, it might be that little bit of extra motivation […] then they think, *'Oh, well, now I know why these exams are important, because they're part of that process'.*" (IT1James – BC/ME, pp. 3, *my emphasis*)

We can see clearly the characteristic concatenation of the various elements already discussed in James's talk. "[V]ision", motivation and a "burning sense of purpose" guided by the "future version of themselves" they wish to become, forces students to understand "*why these exams are important*" ("because it's actually important") thus raising the stakes of their A-levels and encouraging an intense focus on the present and on the self.

For the logic and process of "self-realisation" to make sense there must be some inevitability constructed between who individuals are and what they do *in the present* with who they will become *in the future.* Forging a deterministic, causal relationship reinforces students' present (and permanent) responsibility facilitating their autonomisation to 'look after the(mselves in the) present' to reap dividends in the future and accept accountability for the results. As an example of this

rationality, below is a selection of extracts from the Principal's beginning of year rallying address to returning students:

"Today, it's much more important to ask yourself are you doing enough to help you stand out from the crowd when you're applying to universities or applying for a job, there's loads of benefits of being a student here at *Brook* so please take advantage of all those support services. One of the things we want every one of you to, every single one of you, to get involved in is some kind of work-related activity. […] If you do get a paid part time job, that's fantastic and you'll be getting some very valuable skills, but please do not do more than ten hours per week as all the research indicates that if you it will have a detrimental impact on your grades and then as such a detrimental effect on your long term economic prospects […] Now, there are no guarantees in life but the statistics on this are very clear and what they show is that average earnings of people who went to university compared to those who don't go to university as they get older; and the gap between them gets wider. Typically, at the age of about 30, people with a degree […] are usually about £500 on average better off per month than those people who did not get a degree, and as I say these are no guarantees but these are the average statistics […] OK, so you're all back today to start your final year at college, and to use an Olympics analogy, it's your last lap in the English education system and whatever has gone before, it's all about how you finish […] It's where you finish that counts." (Mr. Gray, FN12a, pp. 3-5)

And, to tie this all together more firmly in the "perpetual educational present" (Allen, 2012a, pp. 13) the Principal states unequivocally:

"Whatever they are, your grades will have a massive influence on your career prospects throughout the whole of your working life, so during this final year just give it your best shot at all times, rather than spend a lifetime wondering 'what if'. Give everything you've got in everything you do at college here, and if you do, a lifetime of opportunity and rewards will be waiting for you just around the corner. Just remember that, the things that are worth achieving in this life are rarely designed to come easily; A-levels aren't easy, they are precious, and they are highly sought after, so work hard […] and you will be fine I'm sure." (FN12a, pp. 5)

For 17-18 year-old students, expressions like "your grades will have a massive influence on your career prospects throughout the whole of your working life" can make exam performance seem like it carries 'the weight of the world'. And perhaps, this is part of its performative-productive effect. It could be argued that the Principal deploys a discursive sense of fear and insecurity drawing on a pervasive social anxiety regarding the availability of "career prospects" in a precarious job market to emphasise the stakes involved in academic performance. You don't want to "*spend a lifetime wondering 'what if'*" and be plagued by regrets for what you *didn't do*. In this way, again, students are responsibilised with the production of their own *future* advantage and psychological wellbeing through advantageous job market positioning and financial security/prosperity by focusing on exam performance *now;* by doing more and more and more to manage risk. This is achieved by positioning A-Levels as the "last lap" of formal education but the 'first step' in one's "working life". Anna (Student) noted:

> "…for people my age, obviously everyone is worried about the future and stuff but the idea is that university is a stepping stone; a stepping stone to a career you want to have. Teachers and parents are always on at you to keep that in the back of your mind." (IT1Anna – BC/ME, pp. xx)

What's more, future success is moralistically framed in professional-economic terms; that is, the 'good' of education is to invest in one's future employability and prosperity. These are the moral 'goods' students should "keep in the back of their mind" and pursue in life through their education imbuing it with an instrumental character. Students' future professional positionality, their "prospects", are inextricably tied to A-Level performance, evident alone in advice that doing over 10 hours of part-time work per week *"will* have a detrimental impact on your grades *and then as such* a detrimental effect on your long-term economic prospects". (I would be remiss not to mention that, for many students, undertaking part-time work beyond 10 hours per week was/is not a choice but a practical necessity probably only adding pressure onto already pressured individuals.) The Principal's parting advice, then, makes perfect sense:

"Give everything you've got in everything you do at college here, and if you do, a *lifetime of opportunity and rewards will be waiting for you just around the corner*." (Mr. Gray, FN12a, pp. 5, *my emphasis*)

The dominant wisdom is one of determinism: *your present shapes your future; look after the present and the future will look after itself*. In this way, education is (re)constructed as an input-output investing model. While in one breath there are "no guarantees", the Principal's parting comment suggests there is – "…a lifetime of opportunity and rewards *will be* waiting for you" ("work hard […] and you'll be fine, *I'm sure*"). This last expression imputes an affective dimension and invokes a sense of emotional-psychological wellbeing tied to professional and economic wellbeing. To me, this brings into sharp relief the kind of performative neo-liberal governmental rationalities and 'realities' from which they spring.

This idea then provides some sense to other comments made by mentors, teachers and adults related to discourses of skills and (enhancing) employability. For example, while spending time with the Vocational Health & Social Care department, one of the teachers delivered a short introductory presentation to new students about extra-curricular provisions, highlighting the "*Brook* Advantage" scheme focusing on activities to enhance skills and employability. On the slide shown, underneath the "*Brook* Advantage" logo, was the headline, "HAPPY, SAFE, SUCCESSFUL & EMPLOYABLE" followed by the sub-line, "your gateway to a rewarding future" (FN5a, pp. 14). Additionally, completely encircling the classroom was a bunting-flag display, each flag containing a keyword: "OPPORTUNITIES", "OPTIONS", "VISIONS", "GOALS", "OPENINGS" and "PROSPECTS". The bunting stretched the perimeter of the classroom finishing beside the following poster (*Fig. 12.0.*):
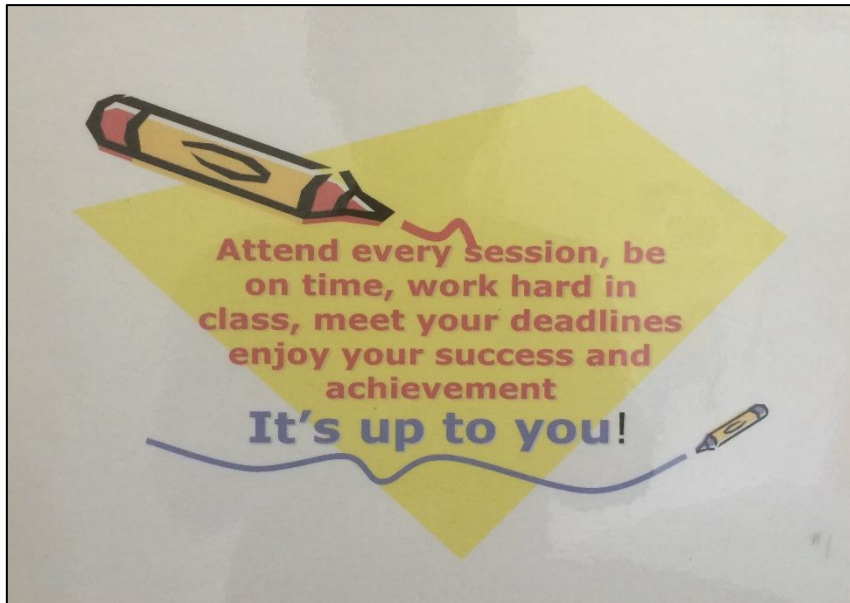
An entrepreneurial ethic seems threaded through the idea of "self-realisation" evident in the routine 'hurrah words' (Coffield, 2002, pp. 41) of enterprise discourse/s like "opportunities", "options", "openings", "prospects"; even the adaptability implied in "*flexible*, magnetic goals" has an entrepreneurial inflection. An entrepreneurial ethic/'entrepreneurial self' sees "opportunities" and "prospects" as things to be actively and strategically created and seized because, through our investment in them, they provide a 'return' through advantageous positioning and personal development. The penultimate phrase, "enjoy your success and achievement", is also telling in how it positions "success" and "achievement" on an affective plane. Students are invited to see success, firstly in terms of educational achievement (e.g. *getting good grades, winning awards, going to 'prestigious' universities, etc.),* and secondly and contingently, in terms of future life success leading to a "lifetime" of prosperity. Furthermore, and again signifying their responsibilisation and individualisation, students are invited to "enjoy" the fruits of their labours resulting from these narrow constructions of success. By implication, when one does not succeed, it will have been because of one's own conduct – "*it's up to you!*" – and no 'joy' may be had. Remember, "it's where you finish that counts". Through their totalised responsibility, students may only achieve happiness

and joy through "success" defined in performative terms reifying these activities and areas of life as the fundamental moral-ethical 'goods' each and all should be pursuing in life, and which will determine one's happiness.

As an aside linked to the previous discussions, I want to briefly examine beliefs about the instability and uncertainty of the employment market, and where HE figures in this socio-political context through an interesting field artefact (below, *Fig. 13.0.*). Students, at the beginning of a Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson, were given an article from the website www.theday.co.uk, with the headline: "Youth unemployment levels hit record high" shown below. The sub-heading gives a better sense of how the subject matter is conceived – "*the future looks bleak*" – and what will be discussed – "*what it takes to kickstart a career*".

Fig. 13.0. "The Day" article "Youth Unemployment levels hit record high" (*P317 – BC/ME*)

The text begins by constructing the problem space giving rise to the article, the "already gloomy economy", by listing the "latest [*unemployment*] figures in the UK" and comparative international statistics. The overall effect is to characterise this pattern as a pervasive, global affair and position today's young people as "part of the global 'lost generation' struggling to find work". Sally, a senior member of student services staff charged with supporting students' post-college progressions, said:

> "…some sessions we do in tutor groups, *we have a little slide about Job Seekers Allowance, and 'we don't want you to end up in this situation' and so you need to be proactive* […] most of them will be 18; *they will have to take that responsibility.*"
> (IT1Sally – BC/ME, pp. 10-11, *my emphasis*)

Invoking "Job Seekers Allowance", as Sally does, clearly draws on and reinforces the economic 'fear' and stigma attached to social welfare. In the same sense, Caroline also stated, "there's a lot more to lose now, in some ways. The job market just isn't as stable anymore" highlighting the precariousness and uncertainty of the current graduate employment market. Businesses, too, are also conceived as 'victims' of this situation ("struggling firms"), yet are also cast in a position of enormous power by having "larger and better cohorts compet[*ing*] [sic] for fewer jobs". The situation, however, is constructed as primarily the 'graduate's' problem to bear. The article casts the rhetorical question: "so, what does it take to get hired in this ominous climate?", the answer: "*experience, unsurprisingly, is the magic ingredient*". In the closing paragraphs, we are told students need to get experience, "have to *think creatively* about getting it" and need to "*tailor your cv* so it shows you really are the best candidate for the particular job" and "do your background research" – echoing personal statement advice almost verbatim and showing these 'skills' as much more than confined to this one activity. It is also the individual's personal responsibility to "ferret out opportunities", and gamble on "speculative phone calls, e-mails and letters" stressing entrepreneurialism and producing for oneself one's own success. All in all, what is communicated is students' personal responsibility to produce their own employability and competitive advantage by investing in a variety of 'experience-giving'

(maybe 'capital-giving') activities. Then, in the final paragraphs ("Jobs in a cold climate"), the problem of "the circus of applications and rejections" is shifted, again, onto individuals:

> "For those struggling to find a job, the circus of applications and rejections can be devastating – *it can crush a person's confidence until they feel there's just no point. For optimists though*, struggling against adversity can bring out the best in someone, pushing them to fulfil their potential. Tough competition, after all, makes people more driven not less so, and the fact that someone has to go through more to get their talent recognised might just mean achieving more than they'd otherwise think possible" (*my emphasis*)

The first phrase of the second paragraph suggests that "for optimists" there is no problem. "[O]ptimists" roll with the punches because suffering "adversity" helps "bring out the best" in them leading them to "fulfil their potential". The "optimist" sees "adversity" as indications of *their* lacks and, as such, opportunities to work on themselves to produce advantage. The "optimist" is an 'ideal' neoliberal, entrepreneurial self who relishes "tough competition" 'driving' them to do more; compete more. By contrast, the (*implied but absent*) 'pessimist' takes everything 'to heart'; is paralysed by "adversity" and "tough competition". A 'pessimist' will not '*go through more* to get their talent recognised'. It is a problem of subjectivity, or mindset, that fails to see "adversity" and "tough competition" as opportunities.

Constructing the reality of the employment market in this way places responsibility squarely on the individual, and in so doing, summarily neglects the 'social' and its problematic structural features. Burman (2018, pp. 418) comments: "Such assumed consensus risks naturalising particular definitions of sociopolitical problems, as also understandings of whose problem they are". We can see how the problem of graduate employment is constructed in this way, by "overlooking gaps and contradictions" (*ibid*), such that they appear 'natural'. No attention seems to be paid in this article to the historical, socio-economic and political antecedents which may have given rise to the "cold climate" students find themselves; the 'financial crises' of 2008, subsequent austerity measures or

the uncertainty of Brexit are relevant, contemporary examples. This social element is neglected or silenced and replaced by an individualised responsibility *to* and *for* oneself. Individualised responsibilities of this sort shift focus from individuals' understanding their place in essentially collective social problems and their power to act upon such issues collectively – and we can see this clearly when the way through the problems of the "gloomy economy" and an "ominous" job market become a series of strategies focusing on improving oneself. Servant-Miklos & Noordegraf-Eelens (2019, pp. 2) support this idea in their critical examination of "SDL" (i.e. self-directed learning) arguing that "methods focused exclusively on individual learners are failing to provide students with the means to analyse the social components of collective problems, to help students understand their place in collective issues, and empower them to act upon societal problems".

7.2.4. Self-Vision: *"take control of your learning"*

Elaborating and moving beyond "self-realisation", while trying to ground it in everyday pedagogical practices, we can look to examples of formative, self-reflective, goal-setting activities students are continuously required to engage in. These types of self-reflective and target-setting activities – particularly "SMART target" setting – form a significant part of everyday pedagogy in modern progressive education advocated in UK policy discourses focusing on 'personalisation' (Day & Tosey, 2011; Frankham & Hiett, 2011). Mentors and teachers utilised a wide range of these tasks and strategies to encourage students to harness the productive, corrective, reflexive training power of *self-vision* to support performance and instigate progress; to engage the (lifelong?) process of "self-realisation". In this sense, perhaps we can better appreciate adult invocations of increasing students' independence, in the context of "vision" and "self-realisation", and its intertextuality with discourses of 'empowerment'. Zimmerman (2002, pp. 65) argued that the teachers' role, in supporting students becoming "self-regulated learners", is to "empower their students to become self-aware" echoing the Delphic maxim the Philosophy tutor cited earlier, who also stated: "the first thing, in terms of success, is knowing; honestly reflecting and thinking about where you're at." (FN45, pp. 13). Thus,

self-reflection was positioned as an essential, formative strategy all students required to ensure their continuing performance and progress.

In particular, one self-reflective activity/document occupied a central role in the college's operationalisation of the A-Level Mindset programme and "VESPA" model, named: "Take Control of Your Learning: The Key to Success at *Brook*" shown below in *Fig. 14.0.*:
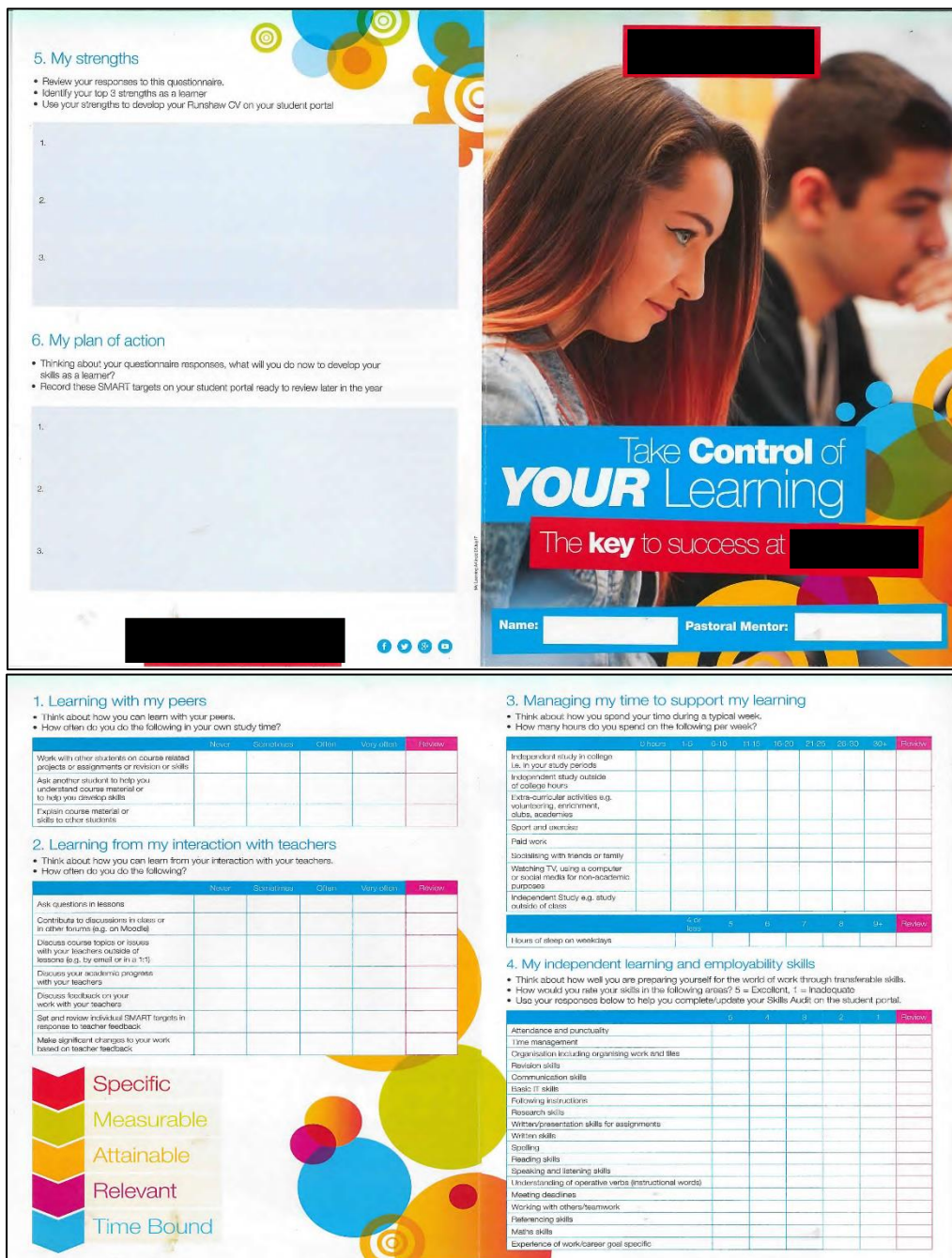
Fig. 14.0. "*Take Control of Your Learning: The Key to Success at Brook*" – Self-reflection survey, front & back matter and inner-matter, respectively (P328 – BC/ME)

Christine, a Head of A-Level Studies and central figure in the college's adoption of A-Level Mindset, described this document, the activity it formed part of and its "strategies", as such:

> Christine: "*It's a self-review* […] we're doing it right across the college. […] the heads of study did it together to make sure it was pretty much, could be used on any programme. But, *the good thing about it is it's making students reflect, where it's making them set targets*. […] *Within that, there's things they should be doing to make themselves more active and more independent as learners*. […] it's not meant to be a survey they just do, it's meant to be, 'Well, here's a survey and also, these are strategies for you to use', and we're doing quite a shift this year and pushing this, particularly, on A-Level" (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 21*, my emphasis*)

Hayley, described it as:

> "…a tick box questionnaire for them to do where they tick whether they're confident or not confident in certain things or whether they do some things more than others, more often. […] there's all different sections in there, then they do target-setting following that on what areas they need to work on […] again, it's getting them to reflect on the things *they need to work on* […] like, '*Right, what do I need to do now to get this better?*'" (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 19*, my emphasis*)

In these extracts, we can appreciate the rationality and object of "self-review" – "*it's making students reflect, where it's making them set targets".* This was conceived as students "taking control of their learning", itself positioned as "*the key to success* at *Brook*" thus reinforcing the versions of 'success', and the means to achieve it, constructed through this document. Indeed, mentors routinely highlighted students' perceived inability to critically evaluate themselves and set their own targets as a fundamental problematic underpinning students' lack of independence necessitating and legitimating such interventions. Caroline, after delivering a short presentation to her students about "setting yourself SMART targets" reinforced its necessity saying: "…they don't necessarily get it. They sort of think 'work harder' is a good enough target […] *students don't necessarily know how to set their own targets.*" (FN22, pp. 19).

Christine's label – "self-review" – too, is noteworthy. To me, the underpinning logic of this activity and practice rests on turning students' critical vision ("…-*view*") inwards to generate actionable self-knowledge ("*self-*…") to stimulate and guide target-setting for improvement. The "self" is both subject and object here; that is, the "self" is the one doing the 'reviewing' and the one being 'reviewed'. The knowledge one derives from this activity is "self"-generated, and "self"-serving; again, the student is agent and target. Zimmerman (2006, pp. 65) argues how practices encouraging students to become "self-regulated learners" requires just such a focus "on *what students need* [*sic*] *to know about themselves* in order *to manage their limitations*" (*my emphasis*).

Students are obliged to reflect on themselves in specifically prescribed ways, along the categories of the "self-review" produced by the college – and in this way, we have clear referents to institutional definitions of 'learning', 'success' and 'progress' (*to name a few*), as well as "expressions of a series of underlying beliefs and values" (Neave, 1988, pp. 18; cited in: Power, 1997, pp. 93) inscribed in the practice which "compose a field of institutionalised expectations and instruments" (Shore & Wright, 2000, pp. 3). The term "*re*view" perhaps also indicates that this is a *re*-viewing, not simply in the sense of revisiting something, but also in the sense of re-orienting one's subjectivity, one's "vision" towards oneself. Hence my contention that within the notion of "vision" as a necessary feature of pursuing "self-realisation", students are also required to develop their critically evaluative *self-vision* as an essentialised component of becoming (more) independent, autonomous learners.

There are some features of this "self-review" that I feel warrant further attention in these respects. Firstly, the language; in particular, the 'personalised' syntax employed. The titles of the sections are phrased with personal pronouns, such as: "1. Learning with *my peers*", "2. Learning from *my interaction* with teachers", "3. Managing *my time* to support *my learning"*, "4. *My independent learning* and employability skills", "5. *My strengths*" and "6. *My plan of action*". As Christine commented during interview:

"…it's also the actual things that we're surveying them on, like how learning from your peers – it's all written actually to the students. So, as if it's the students' thing, so it says 'learning from *my* peers', 'learning from *my* teachers'." (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 22, *emphasis in original*)

As Christine says, the language and syntax is not accidental – "it's actually written to the students"; "*as if* it's the students' thing". But, of course, it's not "the students' thing" at all. While articulating one of the A-Level Mindset's most attractive features, Christine noted:

"I've found this approach […] it's like it just differentiates itself for everyone."
(IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 44)

In the following interview with Christine, I probed this idea further where she added:

"…we're really pushing for it to be – *it's got to be about the individual, and doing much more with them individually* […] that idea of looking at them as an individual, and then the rest of the VESPA stuff […] it's meant to be about the student"
(IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 19-21, *my emphasis*)

This is an externally constructed and imposed activity, with institutionally valued categories, notably *not* of students' making. In this context, Emma's characterisation of "self-review" as "all very much *student-led*" (IT2Emma, pp. 6, *my emphasis*) reads as somewhat fallacious. Even Zimmerman (2002) notes how "students are seldom given choices regarding academic tasks to pursue" (pp. 69). Rather, students are *obliged* to "self-review" and this obligation comes from above. These kinds of activities are not instigated or constructed by students. Perhaps, the only way we can understand Emma's idea is by arguing students are the sole agents responsibilised with "self-review", and as such, it is "student-led". But, students do not really have a choice about conducting this work and are really being 'led' by the invisible hand of their mentors.

Any 'real' sense of 'personalisation' here is "simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1981/1994; Frankham & Hiett, 2011). Christine tells us this activity was designed so it "could be used *on any programme*" and with all students thus giving an air of personalisation while applying *en masse* to each thereby

undermining students already assumed uniqueness and individuality implied in the document. So too, the institution's and teacher's/mentor's contributions to, and responsibilities in/for, students' performance are absent and subtly rolled back.

Emma's comments about her perceived impact on student performance are illuminative in this regard:

> "I do think we have an influence [*on student performance*]. I think we have some responsibility too. […] but there's a limit to it […] I can contribute to this, but, is that down to me? No! Is it heck!" (IT2Emma – BC/ME, pp. 32)

It is important to note that mentors do not have formal subject teaching requirements, and so, their responsibility for student achievement is somewhat different from subject tutors. Emma, above, also highlights the essentially zero-sum character of responsibility by stating mentors have "*some* responsibility […] *but there's a limit*". This "limit" marks the tipping point; the end of mentors responsibility and the beginning of students' responsibilisation. Maria, a hopeful Medical student who failed to meet her AS-Level "MTG"s (i.e. Minimum Target Grades) for Biology and was refused progression onto the A2-Level course, discussed the "trick about A-Levels":

> "…it's just expected here [*at Brook College*] that like if, 'Oh, you're failing, you have to go and find things out yourself, do more yourself, reflect on yourself, instead of…', like it's your problem rather than the teachers […] [*if you're failing*] you have to go and find out for yourself, go do it for yourself and that's the trick about A-Levels." (IT2Maria – BC/ME, pp. 4)

The "trick" is understanding and accepting one's own responsibility to "reflect on yourself" and "go do it for yourself" because ultimately (under-)performance is "*your problem*". And, there is a corresponding implication in Emma's words that she perceives her role as a mentor as one of facilitation, limiting her felt-responsibility – "I can contribute […] but, is it that down to me? No!".

Rather than this document and practice reflecting increased 'personalisation', this is an example of individualisation. We can see this clearly in the way even collective, group-based activities are framed, where even "learning *from* your peers" and "learning *from* my […] teachers" are conceived individualistically, and instrumentally, in terms of what one can gain from another.

Furthermore, the knowledge one derives from this activity is "self"-generated in order to be "self"-serving. Ideas of the 'collective' or 'collaboration', then, begin to lose all authenticity and disappear as individual(-*ised*) concerns are implicitly elevated. Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens (2019, pp. 12) note "SDL"s (i.e. self-directed learning) fundamentally individualised views of self and learning, arguing: "In this setting, even small-group active learning can be framed as an inter-personal exercise benefitting individual students 'collaborative skills' or 'interpersonal skills' and other valuable curriculum vitae additions". That is, collective or collaborative work are a capital reserve students may draw from as a means to their own ends.

During his presentation, MG discussed interviewing students about "their strategies and approaches to studying" in order to examine why some, with 'good' GCSE grades, under-performed at A-Level, stating:

> "You might start off by getting some externally justified answers and reasons [*for students' under-performance*], like 'this is what happened to me', like nothing is the student's fault *to start with*." (MG, FN34a, pp. 3, *my emphasis*)

It is the final part of this expression – "*to start with*" – I would like to draw attention to and which, I think, highlights the central individualising and responsibilising functions of "self-review"; eradicating "externally justified answers and reasons" and making students accept *their* responsibility. Students do not understand their responsibility for and accountability in their own learning, such that "nothing is their fault *to start with*"; that is, until an activity of this nature discursively (re)structures the "régime du savoir" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 781), and students' subjectivities, to force vision on the self, whereby the only person who *can be* at "fault" is

themselves. The target is for students to only create '*internally justified*' reasons for (under-)performance, and in doing so, everything beyond them recedes. In this sense, the document is overtly performative in that it invites subjects to see, do and become that which it implicitly supposes (Burman, 2018).

Secondly, I would like to draw attention to the embedded 'strategy' of this "self-review" activity. In the first 3 categories to be 'reviewed', there is a curious equivalency forged between frequency and quality/success that serves to facilitate the basis for crude quantitative evaluations to follow. Students are to read the individual practices contained in each section as the key practices pertaining to that domain of learning and which fundamentally foster or determine success. In this way, 'successful' learning is atomised and reduced to a pre-set repertoire of technical practices, activities or behaviours. For each of these decontextualized, disaggregate sets of 'ideal' practices and activities, students are required to articulate "*How often*" they do them reinforcing the overly simplistic axiom '*more is better*'. Furthermore, the connection of frequency counts and quality, highlights the performative input-output conceptualisation of learning this document produces and reifies. A discourse of '*more is bette*r' also supports an investing ethic; the idea of increasing input to ensure a greater value or quality output.

We could argue such atomisation of 'learning' into sets of practical and technical, outwardly visible, 'countable' activities and practices supports a performative, behavioural, skills-based conceptualisation of the educative process as 'learning as doing'. Being forced to quantify/qualify whether one *does something* "Never", "Sometimes", etc. forges a loose connection between *doing* (more) and (successful) *learning.* MG commented:

> "…of course, they've [*i.e. students*] grown up thinking education is about knowing things. I've caught myself a lot in Key stage 3 and 4 classes stopping the class for a minute and saying, 'Hey, everyone, pens out, you need to know this' and then they all write it down. And, *they've heard that so many times that they equate knowing with being really good at something, not doing with being really good at something.*

> *So, if you can begin to express learning as doing, and not knowing – [as in]* 'these are the skills you'll need to be good at, this is how to execute them under different circumstances' then they'll become better learners as a result" (FN34a, pp. 23)

"These are the skills you'll need […] this is how to execute them […] then they'll become better learners as a result" – in this truncation, we can see the characteristic re-structuring of 'learning', and the associated production of specific kinds of "learners" fitting to its image, based on a practical and technical conceptualisation of "learning as doing, and *not knowing*". Stressing this idea during his training presentation, MG noted the difference between 'dreaming' and doing:

> "*There's a distinction between those people who are comfortably in the dream position and those students who are in a position to make the outcome more likely*, so this is how we've gotta attack it, we gotta say: 'So, when was the last time you took an action that makes Law a more likely outcome?' […] there'll be *a* reason why they can't take some action immediately and then you'll be able to share with them, '*Look, there's a difference between a dream and a goal*, *you're in the wrong zone at the minute*.'" (FN34a, pp. 8)

There is a clear "distinction" between "a dream and a goal". One is 'real', the other not. A "dream" is in our head; '*dreamers have their heads in the sky*'. 'Dreamers' fail to take "action". Whereas if you're in the 'right' "zone" you are active; you take "action that makes […] [*an*] outcome more likely". Being 'right' involves being the 'right' kind of person MG proposes. Being 'right' is agentic, it involves doing something and, as such, is fundamentally performative.

Of course, a distinction between 'doing' and 'knowing' is absurd but illuminates the separations that provide the programme's legitimating rationality. For instance, when learning is (re)conceived "as doing, and not knowing", then skill, technique and proactivity take precedence, not knowledge and critical understanding; therefore, more technically skilled and proficient students are "better learners". It appears this *post hoc* reasoning emerges from a 'new' conceptualisation of (what counts as) 'learning' and "learners". Learning, here, is not something which takes place (*even partially*)

invisibly, out of sight, inside the mind (or between the minds) of students (and teachers, etc.) – this would not correspond with the implicit rationality of "self-review", nor its demand for easily processed quantitative data to permit the audit procedure itself. Only that which is outwardly visible, in the form of practical, technical and performative practices and behaviours, are countable and thus, count. Hayley discussed giving students praise for their performance – something which, we are told by its authors, is to be treated with caution in the A-Level Mindset book – stating it was best to "choose an example of something *they've done* really well that's *a firm piece of evidence of something they've done* […] it's all evidence based […] *I always choose something they can visually see that they've done*" (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 31*, my emphasis*) emphasising the *necessary* visibility of learning to be counted as learning at all.

Likewise, some mentors stated why they thought the A-Level Mindset programme/"VESPA" model was 'good' was simply because it was "really practical […] rather than just theory, *it's about doing it*" (IT1LT – BC/ME, pp. 7*, my emphasis*) and opposing this idea to prevailing beliefs about 'unhelpful', 'unusable', highly-theoretical educational research. Christine even described the A-Level Mindset book as a "manual" (*ibid*) whereas Caroline described "VESPA" as a "toolkit" (IT1Caroline – BC/ME, pp. 10-11). We can even see how pedagogy is complementarily (re)constructed, technically, "as doing" facilitating its learning equivalent. As Christine said, it's "just proper teaching" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 30).

Lastly, we should note the final, pink column attached to the first 4 categories – "*Review*". Essentially, this "self-review" was to be a 'living document' students needed to return to periodically to "review" their responses, "SMART" targets and action plans to identify what progress was made (or not), only to re-engage "self-review" again. Hayley stated:

> "SMART targets they set for themselves […] [*then*] they take a photo of the page with the targets so that they could always look at that and remember, what is the target? What's in their mind for this term? What do they need to work on?"
> (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 20-21)

This was not meant to be a single "review", but rather was intended to form part of a perpetual process of self-evaluation, feedback and target-setting representing a permanent ethical regime of the self responsibilising them both with their own emergent needs and the obligation to address them – "students always need to keep track of their own needs" (FN3b, pp. 41).

The final category – "My plan of action" – suggests, a student's "self-review" necessarily generates self-knowledge ready-made for "SMART" target-setting: "Thinking about your questionnaire responses, *what will you do now to develop your skills as a learner?*". Again, this final question reinforces 'learning as doing'. Likewise, rendering self-knowledge into "SMART" targets – that is, "specific", "measurable" and "attainable" (or, '*do*-able') further supports the outwardly facing, (ac)countable performativity of 'learning as doing'. Fielding (1999) discusses a similar "policy pathology" for target-setting which he suggests, on the dominant reading, becomes understood and practiced as the "Viagra of […] educational under-performance". Fielding (*ibid*) argues this means being "seen to *do something*" is most important in order to satisfy "an increasingly promiscuous accountability" (pp. 277) that diffuses across networks of individuals. As it relates to the discussion thus far, Fielding (*ibid*, pp. 279) also suggests:

> "The virtually hegemonic appeal of target-setting lies as much in its contextual insistence on developing ways of working that, firstly, clearly demonstrate what it is we have been doing, secondly, open up our work to external scrutiny in ways which are easily understood and thirdly, fit sympathetically within a rigorous framework of audit and control, as it does to its internal virtues of substantive achievement."

Fielding (*ibid*) ultimately describes this as "the tyranny of targets".

Bauman's (1993) thoughts on the mitigation of ethical 'risk/s' in reflexive modernity may also be helpful here, particularly what he refers to as the "stratagem of close focusing" where a complexly interconnected "'problem'" is "cut out from the tangle" and made into "a 'task'" (pp. 194). In this way, avoiding, mitigating or managing the risk of under-performing is achieved by the discursive technologies and procedures of audit. Bauman (*ibid,* pp. 201) also suggests, "that *knowing what is*

going on means *knowing how to go on*" (*my emphasis*) highlighting the instrumentalised importance of reflexivity. And, we can certainly see this logic in the assumed formativity of self-knowledge for personal progress.

The self-knowledge produced from the 'review of the review', then, produces more self-knowledge becoming yet more targets in an endless feedback loop – "record these SMART targets on your student portal ready to review later in the year". In this way, a student is provided a logical procedure to judge their dividends of their learning investments in the form of progress from time A to B reinscribing the performative "relationship between input and output" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 11).

Students are interpellated, called forth to adopt a permanent moral-ethical relation of self to self in order to act upon themselves in certain ways, towards certain pre-defined ends, as defined by the discursive system. In this sense, this "self-review" document represents much more than an innocent invitation to reflection for the purposes of improving academic performance, but represents a profound performative "technology of the self'" (Rose, *et al.*, 2006, pp. 89) students are obliged to adopt to become the 'right' kinds of learners they are required to be as the "key to [*their*] success at *Brook College*".

Taking a governmentality perspective implicates the discourses and practices by which such self-governing capacities of 'autonomous' individuals are installed and aligned with 'official' objectives – termed as "governing…" (*ibid*) or "action at a distance" (Rose & Miller, 2010, pp. 278; Miller & Rose, 1990, pp. 1), "action upon the actions of others" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 790), the "conduct of conduct" (Rose, *et al.,* 2006, pp. 101) or the 'control of control'. And, this final term is of special note as it relates to students' "self-review" and target-setting procedures and the continuous monitoring of their own progress by their 'expert' mentors. Power (1997a; 1997b; 2000) has shown how technologies of audit became an integral element in the operationalisation of neoliberal programmes for "governing at a distance" – "programmes to shape the performance of the auditee in terms of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness" (Power, 1997a, pp. 11). Drawing from Power's

work, Strathern (2000, pp. 4) also notes that a key aspect of practices of audit for 'governing at a distance' involves people checking themselves where the 'authorities' "withdraw to the position of simply checking the resultant indicators of performance". In this sense, it is important to note two things relative to "self-review": firstly, students are, simultaneously, auditor, auditee and *monitor*; and secondly, mentors are charged to both monitor students' self-monitoring *and* the quality/efficacy of students' self-management through these procedures measured in terms of progress. What results is a multi-layered system of continuous audit and control implicating unevenly distributed responsibility and accountability shaping the role of staff and student together. As Hayley (mentor) noted: "*we keep the booklets*, they'll probably lose them […] *its more something for us to refer to in one-to-ones*" (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 20-21) – implicating the primary function of mentors, relative to students' self-management, is monitoring; the second-order 'control of control'.

Emma mentioned how senior management "tried to change our names to *Achievement Mentors* […] now that we have 100% pass rate for our PMR [N.B. *Performance Management Review*]" (IT2Emma – BC/ME, pp. 30*, my emphasis*) which is suggestive, at least, of how the college's management conceives, monitors and evaluates mentors primarily through student "achievement". It is worth pausing here briefly to note that while some mentors seemed to worry over the year-on-year increase to their performance 'targets', and voiced concerns about these to senior management, they often felt largely powerless to resist and counteract them. While interviewing Emma, I asked her where she felt this relentless drive for progress would logically 'end':

> R: So, this [*i.e. "100% pass rate"*] has to be the end, right? what can there be after
> this? What is it going to be, 100 per cent As?
> Emma: I don't know, 100 per cent high grades that'll be next… (IT2Emma – BC/ME, pp.
> 32)

Later in the same interview, I asked Emma about the possibilities mentors felt they had to offer their own opinions on how their job was conceived, conducted and monitored, and if they truly felt able to 'resist' performative impositions they felt were unrealistic, unreasonable, or inappropriate.

R: I suppose - I mean do you guys have - is there any conversation, or feedback both ways, between the mentors and management about the implementation of things like mindset, and the measurements and metrics used to monitor you guys? Can you guys… is there a forum where you are able to say 'no, we don't like this'?

Emma: Yes, I suppose… but when you hear something is coming in or when you know there's going to be a new thing or measurement or whatever it is, it's been so far down the line that it's already set…

R: You've already heard about it.

Emma: Yeah. And, you can tweak, you can say, 'oh, can we do this tiny thing?' but you can't change it, you can't by that point. Don't get me wrong, it's just too big, there's too much, there's too many meetings it's been passed through first…

R: Yes, by the time it gets down to you guys.

Emma: Yes, like it's so set in stone by the time we hear it that it's like all right, 'well we'll slightly change our approach with how we use it with you but it's still there and it's still doing the same thing'. You can ignore it slightly… but you know it's still there.

Lather (2010, pp. 63-64) cites Davies (2006) and draws on Taubman (2007) who, she notes, "calls on some very basic Foucault" suggesting "we are constituted by discourses" that constitute our (sense of) "agency":

> "Yet this 'agency' is profoundly shaped by how neoliberalism works to convince us to be 'both more governable and more able to service capital' in ways that mobilize 'the discourse of inevitability' in order to '*dismantle resistance itself*' (Davies, 2006, pp. 436). Produced by various discourses and practices, in turn producing ourselves in accommodation and resistance, how do we break the hold of […] the demands of audit culture?"

I believe there is a certain tone of resignation and accommodation in Emma's talk above. She, at least in part, implicitly recognises just how 'unrealistic' and 'unfair' (*given her earlier comments about her felt responsibilities in student performance*) the increasingly high targets set for mentors with regards students' performance, and how these are used to evaluate *their* professional performance are, and yet at the same time appears to recognise and become resigned to her

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perceived lack of power to resist, counteract or even modestly subvert them – "you can ignore it slightly *but* […] *it's still there*" – due to her occupationally subordinate professional position and the sense of inevitability she feels.

And, it is also worth noting how such forms of resistance, antagonism or practical subversion itself can carry clear professional 'risks' to one's perceived identity and group membership (even employment itself!) through threatening recognition and acceptance relative to the assumed beliefs, opinions, mores and attitudes of the group professionals at *Brook College*. As an example, Christine (*pastoral mentor and 6ᵗʰ form senior leader*) made comments about perceived 'membership' in the community of educators relative to belief in the validity of the A-Level Mindset programme stating: "I've yet to meet a cynic […] because you think, 'What?! You don't believe in this?! Why are you working here?! Why are you in education if you don't believe these are the key things to getting it right, really?" (IT1LT – BC/ME, pp. 8). Specifically with regards the A-Level Mindset programme, she also noted: "I think because, ultimately, *you can't be a teacher anyway who doesn't want the learners to be more independent*" (IT2LT – BC/ME, pp. 29, my emphasis) suggesting staff needed to accept, "believe" and "buy into" (*ibid*, pp. 29) the programme in order to be recognisable as a "teacher" – and not marked out as an unconstructively critical 'moaner' and pessimistic naysayer, a "cynic". Therefore, the possibilities for resistance, at least among staff, to the various performative impositions that constantly (re)structure their roles, professional identities and the parameters of both 'success' and group recognition/inclusion, appeared vanishingly small. And, moreover, through time staff appeared to progressively 'learn', embody and perform their powerlessness through a recognition of their subordinate occupational position and their apparent resignation to the inevitability of senior management's decisions, becoming more and more apathetic as a result. In this way, as noted above, the very possibility for resistance was 'dismantled'.

Returning to the 'control of control' achieved through mentor monitoring, we can see how this organisation of individuals and "process", along with the technology of "self-review", becomes part

of a "political technology of the self" (Shore & Wright, 2000, pp. 62) supposedly 'empowering' students with the tools to govern themselves while also instantiating a mechanism of quality control from above. Shore & Wright (2000, pp. 61-62), drawing on Foucault (1991; 1977), argue the "supposed 'empowerment'" of audit is both "'individualising and totalizing'":

> "The supposed 'empowerment' of this system rests upon a simultaneous imposition of external control from above and the internalization of new norms so that individuals can continuously improve themselves. […] *external subjection and internal subjectification are combined so that individuals conduct themselves in terms of the norms through which they are governed*." (*my emphasis*)

Power (1994, pp. 19) notes that when 'checks are checked', in the way mentors do, "what is [*secondarily*] being assured is the quality of control systems rather than the quality of first order operations". In this sense, mentors' "PMR"s from their superiors are obliquely judging the quality of mentors monitoring of students self-monitoring *and* the very audit system itself. It is also crucial to note that staff, too, are required to professionally "self-review" as part of their "PMR"s; as Emma shrewdly commented: "There are checks everywhere" (IT2Emma – BC/ME, pp. 36). Thus, the performative pressures of audit and managerialist control do not seem to differ radically between mentors and students.

From the perspective of governmentality, we can appreciate the ways in which students (and, in different ways, staff) are unavoidably responsibilised, individualised, autonomised and led to conduct themselves in characteristic ways, towards pre-specified "finalities" (Foucault, 1991, pp. 95), through such audit procedures exclusively focusing on the self. In this approach, Foucault encouraged a focus on *rationalities* of government, that is, the broad styles and ways of thought/thinking (about) persons and phenomena in addition to characteristic ways of constructing and understanding 'problems', who they 'belong to' and what should be done about them. Donzelot (1979, pp. 77) argued, "technologies" and "strategies" of government implicate "theories which explain reality [*only*] to the extent that they enable the implementation of a program" and "the

generation of [*appropriate*] actions". We could see the "self-review" document as representing such

an "intellectual technology, 'a mechanism for rendering reality amendable to certain kinds of

actions' (Miller & Rose, 1990, pp. 7)" (Rose, *et al.,* 2006, pp. 89). By reconstructing the 'reality' of

learning, learners, mentors, progress, etc. it purports to describe, the "self-review" implicitly sets the

normative "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1979) of what (and who) is thinkable and doable,

acceptable and intelligible, and not.

7.3. Resilience

"Resilience" was a centrepiece of *Brook College*'s interpretation and implementation of the A-Level Mindset programme despite not featuring as explicitly (though, as an explanatory category, it was obviously, implicitly apparent) in the A-Level Mindset book itself save citations from a range of educational and psychological studies focusing on the broad concept of 'resilience'. In the introduction to the book, where the problem of student (under-)performance is constructed and the 'antidote' of resilience is offered and legitimised through this 'scientific' support, the authors note resilience "underpin[s] many aspects of the A-level Mindset model" (Oakes & Griffin, 2016, pp. 5). The authors do not use the term resilience exclusively, or evenly, introducing other related terms/ideas like "mental toughness" (*ibid*; *see* Clough, *et al.,* 2002), "grit" (pp. 7; *see* Duckworth, *et al.,* 2007), "perseverance" (pp. 7) and "buoyancy" (pp. 99; *see* Martin & Marsh, 2009) in a shifting psychological discursive register.

Correspondingly, *Brook College* staff talked about resilience in diverse ways relative to a range of situations and problematics across contexts. Almost unanimously, students were assumed to lack resilience in a variety of forms, circumstances and contexts; a key 'skill' and character trait staff felt was *now* considered essential for (sustained) academic success. As such, *Brook College*'s legitimising pedagogical focus on (developing) students' resilience emerged from on a range of problematisations of students' attitudes and behaviours in the context of their learning activities and academic performance. Staff felt the A-Level Mindset programme/"VESPA" model specifically addressed a number of these 'problems', both directly and indirectly, by encouraging students to develop their own systems and strategies for learning alongside enhancing other 'valued' characteristics, dispositions and learning behaviours to become (more) resilient.

In the first section, here, I explore some of these problematisations to articulate the 'felt need' underpinning the college's pedagogic focus on resilience. Following this, I examine the kinds of practices and activities staff commonly employed to address aspects of these various problem(atic)s

under the guise of developing "self-discipline" through inculcating in students the ability to produce their own self-designed systems *of* and strategies *for* learning. The logic was to foster in students a greater sense of independence, activity, responsibility or ownership, and control over their own learning together with the "self-discipline" presumed necessary to use their own "systems and strategies" to secure higher levels of performance and cultivate formative mechanisms to stimulate (sustained) progress.

7.3.1. Problematisations of students through the logic of "resilience"

As noted, students were almost unanimously assumed to lack "resilience". Mentors and teachers most often invoked the idea of resilience through terms/ideas such as persistence, perseverance, determination, motivation and focus in the context of being able to cope with changes, setbacks, stresses and 'failure' and further, sustain academic performance in the face of sustained challenge. More specifically, though, college staff's talk regarding student resilience primarily appeared in the context of a number of truisms and essentialisms regarding student independence/autonomy, "attitude" and "effort", and their responsibility for or "ownership" of the learning process and their outcomes which became the central problematics upon which the rationale of pedagogic intervention to increase resilience operated and gained legitimacy.

Before moving on to discuss the college's validating problematics, it is worth revisiting the analysis of "vision" briefly. In the discussion of "self-review", I showed how students are made to identify and transform their 'lacks' into actionable self-knowledge to change themselves to pursue improvement. Problems of (under-)performance, as such, become issues of reflexive awareness and adaptive change. In a manner of speaking, then, students' formative and adaptive pursuit of (continued) progress *in spite of themselves* could be thought of as matters of performative-academic "resilience". Through the permanent ethic of reflexive praxis based on self-vision and self-work, students work to increase the 'domain of security' (Zebrowski, 2013) of their performance (i.e.

stability and consistency) and mitigate risk of under-performance. Students are effectively taught and learn how to become self-managers by learning how to identify their weaknesses, positively adapt and change themselves in prescribed ways to secure sustained levels of performance and importantly, progress to achieve the highest levels of academic success.

a) A "Culture of Entitlement" & the natural tonic of "Effort"

Mentors referred to a "culture of entitlement" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 35) among contemporary students (and their parents) which meant they generally expected too much in terms of the amount and type of support they were 'entitled' to and which, they largely felt, were guarantees of success. As a result, many students were described as being highly dependent on their teachers while simultaneously demonstrating academic complacency based on high levels of prior achievement. Christine (pastoral mentor) said:

> "…we're having to start from scratch with some students in terms of their study
> skills and attitudes to learning […] probably with them being very bright, they've
> probably coasted." (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 10)

Invocations of complacency, or 'coasting', imply laziness, a lack of industry and an unwarranted sense of privilege or security thus elevating the E of "VESPA" – "Effort" – and conjoining it with the idea of resilience as increasing systemic security. As Christine also notes, "entitlement" was considered an "attitude" – that are, importantly, conceived as malleable.

Parents, too, were seen as 'entitled' relative to their expectations of teachers and the college and were thought by mentors to be the most significant contributors to students' 'entitled' "attitudes". Mentors believed this led many parents to unfairly point the finger of blame for their child's under-achievement at college staff. On enrolment day, for example, Emma (pastoral mentor) received an e-mail from a Mother complaining her son had been "pressurised" into changing from his A-Level

courses to a Vocational programme because of receiving 'poor' AS exam results. After Emma read

the scathing e-mail aloud to her pastoral colleagues, Ian commented: "well, *we're a service* after all,

aren't we?". While Ian was being somewhat glib, he highlighted a common belief among staff

regarding parents 'distorted' perceptions of them as 'service providers' leading to 'unrealistic'

expectations. Christine (Pastoral Mentor) commented:

> "…there can be conflict with parents sometimes. *The world has changed. I think*
> *culturally its changed to expectation and entitlement* […] I would say that in recent
> times, in the past maybe five or six, seven years, I think what I've noticed is different
> is that – *is there being more of an issue that parents will complain or parents will get*
> *involved and question and demand* […] but again – to us, we have to manage that as
> another resilience-type situation." (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 5-11*, my emphasis*)

She also added:

> "…we don't want to just remove obstacles or remove difficulties [*for students*]. We
> want to see how – if it's the fault of the college, if there is an issue with the teacher
> or an issue with this or that, we want to address it. But, if there's an issue that the
> student is struggling with, *we want to support them in getting over it*." (IT2Christine –
> BC/ME, pp. 7*, my emphasis*)

As Christine states, "the world has changed"; to her, there has been a shift in 'culture' to one of

"expectation and entitlement" where parents will "complain […] question and demand", framed

adversarially as causing "conflict" between the college and parents. Christine refers to the need to

"manage" such expectations and "demand[s]" as "resilience-type situation[s]". In these extracts,

"resilience" seems to be about two things. Firstly, changing "attitudes"; specifically, addressing

students 'entitled' "attitudes to learning" resulting in complacency *and* addressing parents

inaccurate/unrealistic "expectations" to curtail blaming. Relatedly, secondly, Christine's invocation

of "fault" implicates a distribution of responsibility and accountability. As she says, if an "issue" is

understood as "something the student is struggling with" then, it is the student's responsibility. For

students, then, "resilience" is about "getting over it". It is about dealing with not getting your way,

what you expect or feel you are *entitled* to. Given the zero-sum character of responsibility, as students are more fully responsibilised mentors are reciprocally de-responsibilised. Two things occur as a result. First, more fully responsibilising students makes it much more difficult for parents to find "fault" with the college or its staff. Secondly, through their de-responsibilisation the mentors' role becomes "support" and empowerment. Mentors roll back their responsibility to become facilitators that help students 'get over' *their* own problems *for themselves*.

Hayley explained:

> "…parents, too, they're almost shocked [*when their son/daughter gets 'poor' exam results*]. They did really well at GCSE and so *there must be something wrong with the teaching.*" (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 22*, my emphasis*)

As Hayley implies here, staff also felt students and parents often failed to appreciate the large "step-up" (FN7a, pp. 18) to A-Level study from GCSEs. They argued this was largely explained by academic complacency based on high levels of prior achievement. Like Christine above, Hayley during this interview also suggested that to address this problem, students and parents' "attitudes" needed to be changed.

Relatedly, MG consistently referred to the pervasive "myth of linear progress" (FN34a, pp. 2) that circulated among students, parents and staff. He said: "…there's a kind of complacency with high-performing Key Stage 4 students […] 'cos they feel they are entitled to the same thing happening again." (*ibid*). Continuing, he said:

> "It's something that a lot of our learners are totally familiar with is this notion that you might travel on a neat upward path from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4, 'cos they've seen trajectories and chances graphs and they've seen the visual representations of this journey a lot, and *they know, what happens to me at this point generates a lot of targets for what I'm expected to do at this point, which will then generate a set of targets for what I'm expected to do at this point and of course, it comes with its problems* […] I mean obviously it's good for the organisation [*i.e. expected/target grade setting and monitoring*]. We need to be able to work out,

roughly, where students should be and the direction of travel but often students read it this way – *the past equals the future*. What happened to me at this point predetermined what happened to me at this point and at this point so we end up with a difficulty in that, *students who have done well up to this point feel that further success is sort of written in the stars for them.*" (*ibid, my emphasis*)

We can see how the perceived "culture of entitlement", 'complacency' and lack of effort among high-achieving students, and their parents, college staff note discursively correlates with the "myth of linear progress" – "*the past equals the future*"; "they feel that further success is sort of written in the stars". Indeed, perhaps the 'shock' Hayley notes and blaming of college staff for under-performance evidences the prevalence of this "myth" among parents.

I also find it interesting to note how deterministic thinking regarding student performance and achievement is roundly 'bad' here, and yet that same deterministic logic underpins the very practice of target grade setting which is broadly "good for the organisation". The same kind of determinism also forms a central technological feature of the discourses of "vision" in long-term life goals.

MG gestures towards how the common practice of expected/target grade setting largely based on GCSE performance "comes with its problems" in that it reinforces the "myth" he decries. But, in this respect, the "problem" is not exclusively a result of problematics in the practices of target grade setting but, rather, with the way students "read" this information making it *their* problem. In this way, focus shifts away from the problematics of the institutional systems and practices that sustain the "myth" and exacerbate its negative effects, and instead, moves onto the student. It becomes another matter of the student's responsibility – to avoid the 'complacency' of believing (too much) in the security of prior achievement, or the certainty of the expected grades they are set.

Additionally, factoring into the college's practices of expected/target grade setting were perceptual judgements regarding students' 'potential' which staff particularly invoked when discussing under-performing students, i.e. *under-performing students were failing to live up to their potential*.

While subject tutors set expected/target grades, pastoral mentors also made judgements of students' potential based, mainly, on in-class assessment data and prior achievement in GCSE and AS-Level exams combined with character judgements. This positioned exam results as a key 'reality' definer of (cap)ability. In this respect, mentors sometimes referred to 'poor' exam results as being a "reality check" (FN4b, pp. 39) for students, and also commented they would evaluate the 'impact'/success of the A-Level Mindset programme by waiting to "see what the results" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 20) were the following year. For staff, 'potential' was understood as latent (*cap*)ability which may or may not be expressed and developed as a result of the choices a student made. This positioned students' outcomes as open to change but fundamentally under *their* control. Failing to perform in examinations as the college anticipated, then, was construed as a personal failure of students to 'live up to' external judgements of their innate talents and (cap)abilities. Exam results also work backwards by redefining the 'reality' of students' potential to begin with.

As noted, the problematic "culture of entitlement" elevated "effort" as a natural tonic for complacency. Certainly, being described as 'entitled' is not positive. It suggests a person has unjustified expectations and will not invest the "effort" deemed necessary to achieve something they believe is a right. Therefore, the physical input of "effort" becomes the simple antidote to "entitlement" achieved by responsibilising and activating students to produce their own success through greater investments of time and industry; simply, '*do more*' and '*work harder*'. By constructing and essentialising "effort" in this way it reinforces the conception of 'learning *as doing*' and success as 'doing *more*'. Learning and success, framed primarily by examination grades, are then reconstructed along the lines of an investment model with "effort" as an essential input.

It makes sense, then, when staff saw the input of high levels of "effort" as indicating students had the 'right' "attitude" consistent with the values of the A-Level Mindset programme/"VESPA" model. In a presentation to students' parents, the Vice-Principal, Mrs. Morgan, said:

"…what we want to do is to try and change their perceptions […] to encourage students [*to understand*] that *it's all about attitude and how much effort you put in* […] *if they put in the effort and practice, then they certainly will get there* [*i.e. 'good' exam results*] […] successful students put in the effort, they really do. They put in more hours of hard work than average students. Now, we expect students to complete about 20 hours of independent work outside of individual lessons each week, and many of the most successful students put in many, many more hours than that, so some of it is all about just hard graft and effort […] So, their attitude has got to be right…" (FN13b, pp. 11)

In the discussion of "vision", it was clear how developing intrinsic motivation directly linked to perceptions regarding the amount of "effort" students were thought to devote to their studies and, as such, the likelihood of success. Here, Mrs. Morgan reinforces and nuances those same ideas through reference to institutional expectations of effort devotion emphasising (again) "*the most successful students*", relative to "average students", who go above and beyond minimum requirements to ensure the highest levels of achievement.

Crucially, Mrs. Morgan constructs effort quantitatively as the number of "hours" spent on "independent work" – representing a clear responsibilisation of students to undertake a great deal of self-directed study outside class time. The relative amount of effort students devote to their studies was seen as a reflection of their "attitude", thus to be ("the most") successful, students must have the "right" attitude which Mrs. Morgan suggests involves changing their "perceptions" linking with Christine and Hayley's comments earlier. Students must be correctively taught to understand that successful learning directly relates to how much "effort" (time) they physically invest on independent study and how much repetitive "practice" they engage in.

Invoking ideas like changing "perceptions" perhaps also indicates that what is required is a change of students' (and parents') subjectivity. That is, actively attempting to change the way students and parents think (about) and understand learning and success by essentialising physical "effort" ("*hard graft*") in terms of time, thereby stressing action and personal responsibility.

b) 'Old school' – 'New school'

Linked to the "culture of entitlement" were references staff made to recent policy and practice in education contrasting the ills of the current culture and ethos of schooling with a veneration of 'old school' values.

One issue that emerged during interview was the problem of didacticism in early years of schooling, i.e. "spoonfeeding" (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 14). On one occasion, Caroline (pastoral mentor) received a complaint from a parent of a student who had 'failed' to meet their minimum target grades who seemed to blame her for "not catching the failure sooner" (FN7a, pp. 17-18). I asked Caroline about the student concerned and she claimed that students have been "molly-coddled" (FN7b, pp. 35) by their teachers meaning that by the time they reach their A-Levels they are passive, overly dependent on their teachers and lacked 'ownership' of their learning. Caroline largely attributed these problems to what she and other staff perceived as the more didactic pedagogical styles and approaches typical of exam preparation at GCSE, but largely present throughout their education to date.

Hayley (mentor) said:

> "When I was here at college, […] we had less resources in lessons. We didn't have fancy PowerPoints. We basically had a teacher talking at us for an hour and a half writing 6 words on the board, so it was up to us to absorb it […] but now they're getting handouts, they're getting outlines of what they're doing. They're getting so much more done for them already […] it's all singing, all dancing now. It wasn't like that when I was here." (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp.24)

Perhaps most telling in Hayley's comments is her implication that *back then* "it was up to us" whereas *today* students are "getting so much more done for them" and therefore, lack the independence which followed naturally. Hayley's use of the term "absorb" is also telling. Discussing learning as 'absorption' implicates ideas of didactic transmission of knowledge alike Freire's (1970/1993, pp. 72) "'banking' concept of education […] in which the students are the depositories

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and the teacher is the depositor." In fact, this understanding was implicit in many staffs' talk regarding learning, especially in the context of sitting examinations.

Christine suggested: "…we very much have to move away from any sort of spoonfeeding […] that's not *effective* learning." (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 14, *my emphasis*). This lends credence to other comments made by Christine – an older, more experienced educator – who similarly stated:

> "…back in those days we were pretty much left to it. I think it was not necessarily the right thing all of the time […] but it was, 'we're making you independent and preparing you for uni by not doing very much work ourselves' […] in my time in education, we've moved away from students being more independent and students taking responsibility…" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp.32)

Increased independence and self-sufficiency discursively correlates with ideas of personal responsibility, as Christine states – "we were pretty much left to it"; "it was up to us", "taking more responsibility". Christine's comments, I believe, also echo what Fielding (1990, pp. 281), citing Ball (1993), referred to as teachers invoking an "atavistic pedagogy of a half-remembered past"; a "'curriculum of the dead'" to venerate 'traditional' values and approaches. This brings into sharp relief Christine's comments that the reason she 'believed' in the A-Level Mindset programme was because it was "old-fashioned" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 9-10). Furthermore, the discursive implication in Hayley's and Christine's talk is that *back then* they were 'better off for having less'. This kind of thinking supports the contemporary reciprocal reduction of teacher input and responsibility in the learning process with the imperative for increased student activity/input and responsibility. And lastly, as Christine says, making students "more independent" through increasing their sense of responsibility was also seen as a necessary preparation for HE where these skills, traits and dispositions were assumed essential and thus, expected in prospective students.

Examining Christine's ideas further, it became apparent how naturalised (the rationality of) the A-Level Mindset programme had become in her thinking about education evident in how she re-storied aspects of her professional history and biography:

"VESPA would just naturally be how I'm doing it anyway [...] I know the VESPA stuff was probably the way I started teaching [...] yeah, definitely would have been using this sort of approach [...] I was probably doing some of it, but without the labels and stuff. [...] [*then, when the A-Level Mindset programme came along*] I thought, 'Oh, this is just like proper teaching' [...] it's just the basics." (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 22-30)

Christine's final comment – "it's just the basics" – reads as the inverse of Hayley's characterisations of "fancy" lessons cementing the undergirding generational problematic. Furthermore, Christine's use of the word "naturally" reinforces the supposed '*real'*-ness, obviousness, 'truth' (i.e. '*natural'*-ness) and common-sense of the programme reinforcing it.

Given her professional seniority and experience, I asked Christine why she felt education had "moved away" from developing students' independence:

"...it's probably to do with government initiatives [...] policy [...] and the pressures on teachers – particularly with league tables – you've got to get 5 Cs or above to get that measure. And, I think measures imposed on teachers and schools [*have*] probably affected approaches [...] [*encouraging a*] 'drilling for the exam' approach [...] it's because of the pressures we're under." (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 34)

Hayley also commented on performative "pressures" from external organisations, such as "OFSTED", saying:

"I suppose, it's all answering to the higher powers as well, like OFSTED [...] *showing what you're providing students* [...] *it's a two-edged sword*. When OFSTED come they want to see evidence that students are doing something and learning something, which is the main thing [...] and*,* sometimes teachers feel forced to provide all those resources [...] *This is where the students are coming in expecting it all to be handed to them on a plate. They don't always realise at first there's an awful lot of independent study they need to do*." (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 25*, my emphasis*)

I believe the above quotes are rather clear 'reflections' of the effects of performative cultures and practices in education. We can appreciate, in Christine and Hayley's comments, how "league tables",

"measures imposed on teachers [*and schools*]" and the accountability of having to 'answer to' "higher powers" have, at least in part from the point of view of practitioners, contributed to the problems they identify – "drilling for the exam".

In this performative context, perhaps we could read the focus on developing student independence/autonomy and responsibility as symptoms of discourses and practices of professional accountability emerging from trickle down "pressures" felt at every level of the system. The performative accountability "pressures" schools face from "higher powers" transform into pressures exerted on teachers leading them to feel they have to 'provide' and show "evidence" of learning, reinforcing 'learning as (visibly) doing (something)' impacting on pedagogy. And, again, those pressures are displaced onto students requiring them to become more active, independent learners who accept ownership of their outcomes. Such accountability pressures result in a situation where teachers have a responsibility to "evidence" their impact. Alike Giddens' double hermeneutic, the "measures imposed" and imperative to provide "evidence" seems to reflect back on what it purports to describe and begins to 'affect' those practices meaning the "the main thing" is/becomes showing that "students are *doing something* and *learning something*". In rather clear ways, then, these pressures actually appear to encourage the more didactic, "all singing, all dancing" pedagogical approaches which, paradoxically, result in student passivity, lack of effort and responsibility staff try to work against; "*it's a two-edged sword*".

Hayley's comments also perform a series of related reinforcements. For instance, only learning for which "evidence" can be provided is perceived to count for the "higher powers" thus discursively cementing the (re)positioning of learning as visibly *"doing* something*"*. Likewise, the phrases "what you're *providing* students" and "provide resources" discursively position teachers and schools as 'providers' which, again, would seem to engender the problematic expectation among students that everything will be "handed to them on a plate" perhaps contributing to the "culture of entitlement".

In the above extracts, there are also interesting connectives with ideas of resilience. Firstly, it seems obvious how Christine and Hayley appear to recognise how certain problematic pedagogical styles and the perceived lack of student independence, responsibility and effort, result from the kinds of performative pressures teachers face. However, as Hayley has it, a significant part of this problem is that it is *students* who fail to "realise" the amount of "independent study *they need to do*". In this respect, perhaps teachers/mentors are responding resiliently to the pressures *they face* by transforming them into a series of imperatives for students to more acutely "realise" the extent of their responsibilities.

Where "resilience" enters the frame in these problematisations, I believe, is in the institutional belief that students need to become (more) independent, need to more fully accept ownership of their learning and responsibility for their outcomes. As such, students are obliged to deal with the consequences of their totalised personal accountability to themselves. "Resilience", in this context, refers to students having to "realise" that the kind of diminished responsibility, passivity and dependence on their teachers which, on the dominant reading, has characterised their education to date no longer exists in *Brook College,* and nor will it in HE. Simply put, students need to change their attitudes and learning behaviours; resilience, here, is adapting to the imposed paradigm change and accommodating to the responsibilities that follow.

c) A "time of great change": *modular to linear A-Levels*

Another issue raised by mentors legitimising beliefs about the 'need' and efficacy of the A-Level Mindset programme, relative to resilience, were exigencies regarding recent changes in A-Level course structure from modular to linear. Many staff expressed a sense of nervousness about this landmark change and how it might affect students' exam performance, highlighting the increased risk involved in a single, final exam. As Hayley said: "now, it's very much a '*you get one chance only*'." (IT1HS – BC/ME, pp. 32). One mentor emphatically stated, "students can't cope with change" (FN7.2,

). More specifically, staff felt students were ill equipped to "cope" with such significant structural changes due to a lack of "systems and strategies" () for learning, particularly related to revision skills and exam preparation. The idea of (in)ability to respond positively and cope with change – indeed the idea of 'coping' – is a recurring feature in dominant discourses of resilience (Burman, 2018; Zebrowski, 2013).

Across two interviews, Christine noted college staff's 'nervousness' about these changes and the potential effects on student performance:

> Christine*:* "…we always ask course leaders in the last meeting of the academic year – 'Right, just jot down for us on a post-it anything you feel now that needs to be quite high on our agenda in meetings next year and things that you want to see next year'.
> R: Strategic items?
> Christine: Yeah. The course leader meetings are about sharing ideas across the courses, but also about us [*i.e. senior leadership*] getting messages out as well and getting feedback from them because they're the key; that's the way it works. This year […] *the majority of course leaders were writing on post-its about ways to make students more independent and preparing them for linear A-Levels and that was basically it. That was basically the gist. Making the first years, in particular, more resilient*…" (, *my emphasis*)

> _____

> Christine: "Well, one of the key things now, to be honest – [*that*] I see the VESPA approach as an absolute gift and so timely, now – is that A-Levels have gone linear. From September, every A-Level is linear. There's no… we're not doing AS [*exams*] next summer. Everything is going linear. *So, teachers, quite understandably, are nervous about this idea that the assessments are all going to come at the end of the two years*. […] So, it really is about – it's a time, another time of great change. And […] oh my goodness, the students, they're hopeless! They don't retain all that information. They're not very good at revising as they go along. Well, this VESPA approach, is about that. Well, they've got to become resilient. These are ways of making them become more resilient." (*, my emphasis*)

Likewise, Emma (mentor) noted:

"I suppose things have changed. Like GCSEs have changed and A-levels are changing, and it is different now to when it was January exams and then, etc… do you know what I mean? [*In the past*] there were four times in the year where you had to be ready and prepared to deal with exams…but now…" (IT2Emma – BC/ME, pp. 8)

Between Christine and Emma's talk, it seems clear how staff's 'nervousness' stems from the perceived performative risk involved in single summative examinations compared to modular exams in conjunction with deficit assumptions about students' independent study and revision skills. Interventions to address this are framed as making students "more resilient". In addition, Christine, like Hayley before, implies a "banking" (Freire, 1970/1993, pp. 71) concept of learning by suggesting a problem is that students *"don't retain all that information"* – something essential(ised) for exam success. Thinking of this kind defines ('successful') learning, especially in the context of formal examinations, as information retention and transmission thereby undercutting mentors' attempts to address "spoon feeding"/"drilling for the exam" as well as reminding students of the "step up" (FN7a, pp. 18) to A-Levels.

This fear or 'nervousness' led mentors and teachers to place great emphasis on teaching students a range of revision strategies and techniques – particularly related to "systems" and "practice". The logic was to help students eradicate 'bad' study habits and establish new, 'good' ones so they could better structure their learning, develop *more* strategic approaches to learning, revision and exam preparation and not simply 'cope' with, but prevail in spite of, change.

In this context, resilience is about the need for students to respond positively to the performative threat of the paradigmatic changes to A-Level course structure and the concomitant requirement for 'new' learning styles to meet its demands. Relatedly, and perhaps more crucially, given the heightened risk in single, terminal exams mentors also emphasised the need for resilience in terms of students' reactions to (potentially) 'poor' results given, *now*, the impossibility of sitting 'repeats' – something which has traditionally provided a sense of security for students who may have under-

performed in exams. Mentors, too, seemed to worry over the potential effects of poor exam performance on students' sense of confidence and self-esteem again positioning exam results as a primary reality definer of not simply a student's (cap)ability, but more profoundly, their personal sense of self-worth. Thus, here, resilience appears to be about submitting learning to the object of exam success and submitting ones' view of oneself as a learner to the defining mark(s) of tests. Here, being resilient, in the face of more risky exams and potentially poor results, is perhaps as much about 'bouncing back' and improving one's performance as it is about accepting the "reality" defining quality of examination results themselves.

d) Mental Health & Brook College's 'culture of success'

Many adults highlighted the contemporary rise in student mental health issues, such as stress (or 'burnout'), anxiety and panic disorders, depression and low self-esteem – not just in *Brook College* but, more generally, in education and society. Following a widespread shift in educational thinking, staff saw students' psychological well-being as a significant barrier to/enabler of academic performance and thus, a key factor in achievement – thus making it a legitimate institutional intervention target. Christine suggested:

> "I think the other reason it's [*i.e. resilience*] taken off here – and elsewhere – is […] to do with the rise in mental health problems as well. That's the other thing that has led to this sort of approach." (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 47)

It was in the context of rising student mental health problems that the most explicit and direct invocations of "resilience" – as a psychological trait – occurred. For staff, students who showed "resilience" indicated they possessed 'strong' character which meant "being able to just get on with it" (IT2HS – BC/ME, pp. 16) in the face of physical, emotional and psychological problems, discursively aligning resilience with grit and perseverance. We can see parallels to Burman's (2018, pp. 430) reflections on the UK's recent *Character & Resilience Manifesto*. She states:

"Replacing an earlier emphasis on risk and vulnerability, *discourse has shifted to topicalise mental toughness and hardiness*. In this context, a positive psychology, happiness agenda shifts beyond the individual requirement to adapt and get back to work quickly, *such that distress and disease become moralised as character deficits or failings* (Chambers and Hickinbottom, 2008; Gill and Orgad, 2018; Harrison, 2012; Hickinbottom-Brown, 2013)." (*my emphasis*)

The mental health problems staff referred to most often revolved around three interconnected issues: *academic pressure*, *perfectionism* and *self-esteem*.

Like Christine, Emma said "the world had changed" (IT1LB – BC/ME, pp. 34) since her own schooling; education now, she said, was much "more intense and serious" and thus carried far more "pressure and stress" (IT1LB – BC/ME, pp. 22) for students. Certainly, we can appreciate the 'reality' of this in Hayley's "you only get one chance" comment.

Discussing the high degree of academic pressure *Brook College* students faced, Christine said:

"…*it's becoming more and more a phenomenon, I think, about [students] being perfectionists and the fear of failure*. They are quite big barriers *that they have to overcome* […] once they start to panic, their resilience strategy is really just to go lazy and just not do it. […] It's almost like they bury their head in the sand […] so, we do have quite a situation with resilience in terms of – it does apply to their own wellbeing and attendance and things like that and taking responsibility, *taking more responsibility*. They're young adults now, and we do have very high expectations at college, but that is because we know what's required to be really successful at A level and they didn't come here to get low A-level grades. I don't think – if you asked any student – I don't think they really want to get Es and Ds. They want to get high grades." (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 3-4*, my emphasis*)

The college is, locally and nationally, renowned for its continuously high levels of achievement which created a culture of "high expectations". This deeply embedded 'culture' and institutional 'identity' manifested in widespread pressure on students for the highest levels of achievement. It was in this context that many mentors discussed the problem of student's being "perfectionists" as it related to

their wellbeing. Students labelled as "perfectionists" were often understood as "their own worst enemy" (FN13, pp. 4) which essentially emphasised *they* were the problem, not the institutional culture. For Christine, being a "perfectionist" is a self-inflicted 'barrier' "*they have to overcome*". Students are plotted in a position of sole responsibility to produce not simply their own academic success, narrowly defined, but through this, their own psychological wellbeing.

Positioning 'perfectionism' as a student's problem means it can only be dealt by the individual thus deflecting focus away from the kinds of antecedent contextual, performative pressures. This brings into sharp relief the idea that such "barriers" must be "overcome" as opposed to eradicated, and thus brings resilience (as coping) to the fore. Perhaps, the intense performative pressures for consistently high levels of achievement students face in *Brook College* are precisely what results in the kinds of anxiety and permanent dissatisfaction ('perfectionism') contributing to sharp increases in mental health problems. Discursively, 'perfectionism' could be read as highlighting the stakes and inherent riskiness involved in academic performance in the "perpetual educational present" (Allen, 2012a, pp. 13). All activities and choices in this 'collapsed time' gain overwhelming significance stressing the absolute need for perfection at every turn. Perfectionism, then, seems a logical if not undesired response.

Likewise, the exceedingly high expectations and narrow margins of what counted as 'success' at *Brook College* contributed to a very real "fear of failure" which staff felt negatively impacted continued performance as well as students' self-confidence. This "fear of failure" appeared to compound with the change to an even more high stakes, linear exam structure. As Christine says above, everyone wants "high grades" – including the college – elevating above all else the drive for achievement as a *shared* moral-ethical value but also highlighting the implicit 'fear' of this precariousness. Many students, however, were thought to crumble under the weight of this "fear of failure" which provided legitimacy for interventions designed to increase/improve students' coping

strategies and affective responses. Importantly, again, the focus is helping students help themselves; empowering them to "overcome" performative pressures and learn to live with "fear" rather than address the structural features eliciting them.

I conducted an interview with Maria, a student who had been refused progression onto her A2-Level Biology course as a result of failing to meet her AS-Level "MTG" (i.e. minimum target grade) of B. Of relevance here, is Maria discussing what she felt her experiences had 'taught' her about studying A-Levels at *Brook College*:

> R: …what kinds of lessons do you feel you've learned?
>
> Maria: *Just, I dunno, not to get too settled down,* be like… I don't know*. Not to get too comfortable at this college, definitely not*. *Like, if everything feels like it's going fine then it's probably not and it's probably really, really bad*. Cos' that's what I thought. Cos like I thought everything was fine, like I had all my notes, had all my revision and stuff sorted and everything is organised, but like, if you don't get it you don't get it. […] Like, I thought – you know from GCSEs where you start about a month out revising and you've just revised everything and you're ok – but not in this [*i.e. A-Levels*], you have to start revising pretty much the day you come into college, start making notes because if you don't you'll just start losing ground." (IT2Maria – BC/ME, pp. 10*, my emphasis*)

As Maria felt she learned, you can't get "too settled down", "too comfortable", implicating the need for a continuous, personal sense of performative insecurity and hyper-activity – "if everything feels like it's going fine then it's probably not". Again, the "perpetual educational present" (Allen, 2012a, pp. 13) comes into sharp focus here. The intense pressure and stakes involved every day, in every activity, when even from "the day you come into college" you could "start losing ground" highlights the pressure students face and contextualises the *need* for perfectionism. Insecurity of this sort encourages greater self-vigilance, pro-activity and a heightened sense of personal responsibility and accountability which more deeply entrench the logics of performativity in a vicious cycle impacting students sense of self-worth. Maria's thoughts, I feel, link in with Ball's (2003, pp. 220) thoughts

regarding 'ontological insecurity' brought about by performative audit cultures: "We become

ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as

others…".

Relatedly, Christine mentioned the relentless "pace of A-Levels", and the pressures this carried

suggesting: "if you're going to get behind with this week's homework, then there's going to be more

homework next week and the week after […] there's quite a few of them that I've been dealing with

recently that there's a backlog of work building up, and that causes anxiety for some of them, or

bury your head in the sand for others." (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 10). It seems remarkable (to me)

that (performative) "anxiety" engendered *by* schooling, here, is not necessarily 'bad'. The final part –

"…cause anxiety for some, or bury your head in the sand for others" – draws on more psycho-

physiological understandings of anxiety as 'fight or flight', positioning "bury your head in the

sand"/"their resilience strategy is really just *to* go lazy and just not do it" as the negative response.

To "bury your head in the sand" means to ignore something or not confront a problem; by contrast,

then, this version of "anxiety" supposes action and obviously draws on and reinforces masculinised

discursive articulations of resilience as reactive 'fighting back' (*see* Burman, 2018).

Christine also commented:

> Christine: "I think anxiety is now almost becoming as bandied as resilience. It's like
> anxiety, resilience, push me pull you. It's like – with anxiety it's about us reassuring
> students that anxiety is a human emotion and some of these strategies will help you
> cope with that emotion – which isn't a very nice experience *but it is quite normal*. It's
> trying to normalise it a bit more."
> R: "You can make that anxiety productive then…?"
> Christine: "Yeah, exactly" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 49)

"*[A]nxiety, resilience, push me pull you*"; "*it is quite normal*". I find this an interesting expression and

feel it underscores my interpretations thus far regarding how a culture of intensely high

expectations is the 'norm' at *Brook College* – or, rather, has been 'normalised' – and as such, the specific kind of performative anxiety that follows is seen as "normal". So too, in Christine's expression, the idea of "resilience" is constructed as a "normal", natural human faculty we all possess and can unproblematically deploy in response to anxiety or stress. This is what gives sense to making students "*more* resilient". Importantly, though, the focus is not on the contextual factors leading to anxiety, "fear" and insecurity, but in *'coping with'* those "emotion[s]". Again, as elsewhere, the social context and its significant factors disappear. Students become more fully responsibilised with the management of this "normal[*ised*]", apparently unavoidable complex of emotions which, on this reconstruction, can be a productive force making students take action. Its productivity is engendered through students mastering their affective responses via "resilience".

Maria's story is also relevant to the final mental health issue – *low self-esteem*. I interviewed Maria directly after she was refused progression onto her A2 Biology course and her plans to study Medicine, in her mind, were over. What struck me most during our conversation was how Maria had fully internalised the reasons for her 'failure' saying, "I just cracked under exam pressure" (IT2Maria – BC/ME, pp. 9) – suggesting she lacked psychological fortitude. Though, Maria claimed the primary reason she 'failed' was because *she* had failed to understand "the way I have to learn", her "own learning method" (*ibid*, pp. 11-12) – suggesting she had constructed *her own* "poverty of personal curriculum" (FN34, pp. 25-26). I shall return to this final intriguing expression later.

Maria was required to switch to a BTEC programme from her A-Levels and noted a "stigma" (*ibid*, pp. 1) attached to these courses: "BTECs can't get you into uni" (*ibid*, pp. 1); "in universities eyes they are shit!*"* (*ibid*, pp. 10). Reflecting on this, she said:

> "It just makes me feel like I'll be towards the bottom of the list, you know, when I
> was doing A-Levels I was like a little bit higher up there... but, not now." (*ibid*, pp. 7)

Because Maria was totally, personally responsible and accountable for her performance such that her 'failure' was entirely her own, this impacted her sense of self-worth. And, it is important to note

how, in large measure, her concept of self-worth was inflected/formed around how she felt universities would value her based on exam performance. Another student in a similar situation, Kevin told me how, having been refused A2 progression, meant he too "felt like a failure" (FN21, pp. 24).

As discussed, *Brook College* exhibited an intense culture of success. A Health & Social Care Teacher emphatically told me: "*Brook College is* high achieving!" (FN5a, pp. 31, *emphasis in original*). Because of this reputation, staff mentioned how other local colleges often referred to *Brook* as an "exam factory" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 52). However, this was routinely dismissed as 'sour grapes'.

Another mentor commented *Brook* was an "extreme example" of a high-achieving institution which meant they "had standards to live up to". That is, the college had a public image of "prestige" and reputation for excellence and success that needed to be continuously upheld and improved (FN7.2, pp. 34) supporting the institutional focus on achievement. In fact, references to the college's "prestige" in this respect were very common; it was a source of pride. The Vice Principal, Mrs. Morgan, addressing parents at a college "Welcome" event, said:

> "First of all, I just want to thank you as Parents and Carers and Family Members for choosing *Brook College* […] most importantly you've invested in the education of your son or daughter for the next two years […] So, I want to thank you for making that decision and I also want to assure you that you have made the right choice. And, *probably one of the reasons you chose Brook college was because of our academic reputation for excellence*, and that is certainly evident this summer in the results that our students achieved. They're absolutely fantastic – some amazing results, 143 students who achieved 3 or more A* or A grades in their A-Level results […] *so I do feel confident that you can expect your sons or daughters to be very successful here at Brook."* (FN13.2, pp. 2)

Andrea (pastoral mentor) spoke about how the college's reputation for achievement and culture of high expectations meant some enrolling students would go from being a "big fish in a small pond" to a "small fish in a big pond" (FN7b, pp. 51) causing a "knock in confidence" (*ibid*) and diminished sense

of self-worth. It seems, for some students entering *Brook College,* the 'goalposts' necessarily move due to the exceedingly high standards by which success (and being a "superstar") were defined. MG implicated similar ideas while discussing "attitude", saying:

> "Attitude! Low attitude students have this kind of, I think I used the term 'imposter syndrome' earlier on. They've got this very strong belief that everyone at *Brook* is really clever except me! Right? So, there's this notion that, 'I don't really belong here', [...] 'Everybody is super clever in here except me'. *So, there's often this comparing themselves unfavourably to others which leads to a kind of self-loathing.*" (FN34a, pp. 29)

MG's ideas appear to correspond to the problematic by-products of *Brook College*'s incredibly high standards and expectations of achievement and (what they are told is) the competitiveness of HE applications stressing the need for the highest possible grades. However, as MG alludes, these problems are the result of students not having the 'correct' "attitude" and 'beliefs'. "[I]mposter syndrome" is a recognised psychological phenomenon whereby an individual possesses a distorted perception of their own abilities and doubts the validity of their prior accomplishments. Fundamentally, then, it is an issue of self-esteem and self-worth, tied up with specific definitions of ability ("clever") and success. The term "self-loathing" is rather sensational and implies a profound hatred of oneself based primarily on students' comparative self-perceptions/conceptions of ability and worth through narrowly performative definitions of 'success' as high test scores. As before, the problematisations do not address the context/culture of performativity, competition, nor the self-worth defining quality of exams, but a student's "attitude" and 'beliefs'. Problems, as such, are "cut out from the tangle of its multiple connections" (Bauman, 1993, pp. 194) with other problems, and are constructed exclusively in the psychological inner world of the student meaning they can only be addressed by the student themselves, and making *changing* "attitude[s]" a valid responsibilisation and pedagogical intervention. Thus, what is sought is a fundamental restructuring of subjectivity so that students come to relish performativity, embrace competition, construct their self-worth through achievement and 'cope' with the vicissitudes of this autonomisation.

Having explored problematics that lent legitimacy to specific pedagogic interventions, now, I turn to discuss how college staff engaged in activities towards increasing students' "resilience", indirectly. It is important to note the college did not precisely 'teach' resilience. Rather, staff encouraged students to adopt a range of institutionally sanctioned "systems and strategies" of/for learning which fundamentally addressed the aforementioned problematics of resilience. Resilience is the object. The subject is developing a range of nested characteristics, behaviours, attitudes, dispositions and techniques shaped by the "VESPA" model.

"Resilience" is difficult to address directly. Rather, as Burman (2018, pp. 424) suggests of the discursive strategies deployed in the *Character & Resilience Manifesto* to achieve a similar reconstruction: "…the imperative to identify modifiable qualities that can be trained or taught requires the broader concept of resilience to be redefined or limited…" such that it is constructed as malleable and amenable to intervention.

As I believe the above problematisations highlight, staff felt developing resilience was best achieved by focusing on a range of nested or related issues seen as functions of (a lack of) resiliency. "Resilience", then, is "redefined" as a problematising "portmanteau" (Coffield, 2002, pp. 41) absorbing a variety of problematisations of students under its expansive discursive ambit.

While there were many examples of specific activities and practices designed to improve students' "resilience" by developing their independence, responsibility/ownership, self-management, etc. my interest in the closing sections is in a general type of activity and the kinds of subjectivities, dispositions and ways of working they suppose, encourage and produce. Mentors felt that to support students developing their resilience, they needed to support them to better structure and systematise their learning in order for them to become more independent, self-disciplined and self-managing, and who would be able to cope with their intensified responsibility.

7.3.2. Producing Resiliency – Producing Resilient Students

7.3.2.1. Systems & Strategies

As I believe I have shown above, the idea of developing students' "resilience" was understood to be achieved by assisting them to develop ownership (responsibility), independence and self-management skills to foster greater levels of self-discipline. Ultimately, I believe, the problematics outlined above are all centrally about exam performance and achievement. Despite the claims staff made about the general(ised) purpose of the A-Level Mindset programme being to address a range of primarily pastoral issues, I never felt its 'true' objective was much more than trying to ensure (the) high(est) levels of achievement in A-Level examinations.

This is not to say that this is automatically 'bad' per se. Despite how we might feel about the reframing of learning and success almost exclusively around exam performance and achievement, it appears to be a pragmatic necessity for contemporary students. Plainly speaking, progressing into HE in (what they are told is) a highly competitive context where everyone needs the 'best' grades to gain places on the 'best' courses at the 'best' universities, and where colleges like *Brook* trade on a "reputation for excellence", A-Levels aren't about much more than getting "high grades" (IT2Christine – BC/ME, pp. 4). It seemed almost everything that went on in the college, directly or indirectly, facilitated this central mission. As such, it was the bugbear of student (under-)performance that provided the foundation for many of the college's 'problems'.

In college, students' academic performance, particularly in formal examinations, was discursively understood as essentially unpredictable and influenced by factors both within and far beyond the college and the individual. Indeed, the logical rationale underpinning the purpose and supposed efficacy of the A-level Mindset programme/"VESPA" model is built on this. The programme takes as its necessary a priori that there are no guarantees in achievement even for those who have historically performed 'well'.

It is this *essential* unpredictability and uncertainty of student performance, especially in exams, that gives warrant to interventions like the A-Level Mindset and the contemporary focus on "resilience". Enhanced control, order and stability, or consistency and predictability, are fundamentally what "resilience" seeks. In this context, what the A-Level Mindset/"VESPA" model really seeks is to make a reality of the "myth of linear progress" by focusing on changing students attitudes and approaches to learning in prescribed ways accorded pertinence by *Brook College*'s interpretation of it. Indeed, the word "linear" should alert us to this. The opposite is 'non-linear' and denotes complexity and unpredictability or, in Physics, the lack of a direct correspondence between two related 'things' such as inputs and outputs. If there were a simple and predictable correspondence between prior and future achievement there would be no "myth" legitimising the programme.

Thus, the main objective of the A-level Mindset programme is to secure greater consistency and predictability of performance and, via the adoption of certain techniques and procedures, and installation/production of corresponding subjectivities, instigate the highest levels of achievement alongside *continuing*/*continuous* progress. Staff worked towards improving student performance and securing achievement by encouraging and providing students with the tools to (better) structure and systematise their approaches to learning and revision so they could begin to conduct their studies more autonomously and strategically.

From extant literature, dominant understandings of "resilience" appear to draw on two general conceptualisations, namely, 'engineering resilience' and 'ecological resilience' (Joseph, 2013). While engineering resilience stresses, "how things return to a stable steady state, ecological resilience is far from stable." (*ibid*, pp. 38). Ecological resilience, contrastingly, stresses how significant disturbances may lead a complex system, not back to its original "steady state" (*ibid*), but to positively, functionally adapt to better cope with shocks in the future. Therefore, resilience is composed of two co-existing and connected ideas as *stability* and *adaptability*. Joseph (*ibid*, pp. 39) cites a publication

from UK think-tank DEMOS (2009) which "suggests that we think of the concept of resilience, not just as the ability […] to 'bounce back', but [*also*] as a process of learning and adaptation".

For instance, as I shall show, the focus on structuring and systematising students' learning emphasises order and control drawing on the engineering notion of increased systemic stability. The apparently desired product of students systematising their learning, for staff, was so that they could achieve greater control – *of themselves* – and secure greater consistency of performance. Furthermore, systematising their learning was thought to lead to students conducting their studies more strategically. In this context, being strategic means being reflexive and identifying how one needs to change themselves to achieve the greatest improvements to their performance. Thus, strategy following on from systematicity implicates the ecological notion of positive adaptability and improvement.

As McGreavy (2016, pp. 111-112) makes clear of "systems ontologies": "Nothing in resilience makes sense without systems as a starting point". The prevailing logic is that a more structured and systematic approach to learning – particularly around "*Systems*" and "*Practice*" – would essentially address the risk of under-performance in exams through fostering greater oversight, standardisation and control of learning processes. Attempting to address the inhering unpredictability, or secure greater consistency/stability, of student performance, then, is a matter of (engineering) resilience in the sense of increasing one's 'domain of security' (Zebrowski, 2013).

For instance, the technology of "self-review" examined earlier is an example of a highly structured and systematic approach to the evaluation of ones learning needs to construct actionable self-knowledge. Simultaneously, students learn to adopt a strategic attitude towards their learning by identifying specific deficiencies in order to decide where to focus "effort" to achieve maximal 'return' through "*SMART*" target setting. As one teacher commented "smart students" don't need to bring work home because they have greater awareness of their learning and so are able to use their time and energy "wisely" (FN9, pp. 4), i.e. strategically. The intertextuality of "*SMART*" targets, "*smart*

students" and using one's time and energy "*wisely*" forges the discursive link between normative ideas of character and ability (being "smart", 'wise', clever) with officially sanctioned educational practices ("self-review" and "SMART" target setting) and associated norms of behaviour (acting instrumentally, pragmatically; *strategically*) accorded pertinence and value by the institution and their versions of successful learning.

Likewise, the activity "energy line" noted earlier is another example of systematicity and strategy in action – "for the first time, these students are *making strategic decisions about where to place their energy*" (FN34, pp. 19). "[S]trategic decisions"/acting "strategically" (*ibid*) necessitates systematicity to 'take control' to minimise inefficiency, maximise effectiveness and provide (the greatest) 'return' on pragmatic investments. Importantly too, in this activity, MG recommended staff "*force*" students to post tasks and activities "with a verb attached" suggesting, as a result, "they become more productive" (*ibid*, pp. 20). It seems clear that 'forcing' students to construct educational tasks with an active verb is a rather simple but powerful, somewhat coercive, way of cementing learning as "doing, not knowing".

So, systematicity is strategic; and acting strategically means acting systematically with the twinned imperatives of efficiency and effectiveness in mind. Hayley (Pastoral Mentor) also commented, "VESPA's a bit of strategy…" (IT2Hayley – BC/ME, pp. 15). By this Hayley meant, "VESPA" is a *strategic approach* to learning focusing on "Vision", "Effort", "Systems", etc. at the exclusion of other things which, due to their absence, are presumed less effective/efficient in addressing (the risk of) under-performance. By structuring students' understandings of successful learning along the categories of the "VESPA" model, a limited range of activities form an 'official', standard repertoire of options students can strategically chose from to identify and address performative issues in a strategic manner. Another mentor described the "VESPA" model as a "toolkit" for students to develop "*their own* systematisation of the learning process" (FN24, pp. 10-11), suggesting its activities encouraged

the kinds of structured approaches and strategically calculative, pragmatically instrumental attitudes to learning deemed essential for the highest levels of performance.

As another example of systematicity and strategy, students were often encouraged use GANTT charts to reflexively monitor on-going projects to help identify when they were at "risk of falling behind". Likewise, MG encouraged staff working with a student identified as "low systems" to "share with them a set of project managements tools", like "energy line" and GANTT charts, stating, "they'll be much better for it" (FN34, pp. 18) – in the sense of making them more *systematic* ("sequencing and organising their work" (*ibid*)) and strategic. "Project management tools" are a well-known adoption from private enterprise and highlights the naturalisation of managerial discourses and practices in education. Management systems and strategies alike those in the A-Level Mindset programme, used by *Brook College,* are mechanisms for imposing order, standardising, increasing control, efficiency and effectiveness relative to resource input (Klein, 1999) that fit neatly with neoliberal performativity.

One of the centrepiece "VESPA" activities at *Brook College* – related to "Vision", "Systems" and "Practice" – was known as the 'CSF questionnaire' (i.e. *Content, Skills* and *Feedback*). MG introduced the 'CSF questionnaire' during his staff presentation while showing a video of an amateur ping-pong player progressively improving through a systematic training regime and the strategic use of varied training "drills" to improve specific skills. MG used this as a metaphor for his ideas on "systems" and "practice" and analogised the ping-pong player's focus on improving certain specific skills – he called them "in game moves" – with students practicing "exam technique" (FN34, pp. 24). Burman (2018) also notes how the term "mental toughness", "a near synonym of resilience […] arose from sports psychology as a set of practices devoted to improving physical performance and endurance (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012; Crust & Clough, 2011), is also frequently cited alongside Dweck's (2006) "growth mindset". All of these authors' work are cited as corroborating sources in the A-Level Mindset book. MG went on to explain:

"…you can say to students, '*Right, how can we take the principles we can see in this video and start applying them to the way in which you practice for this exam*' […] One or two other things on practice and it's the revision [*CSF*] questionnaire […] all practices are three step processes, right? There are those practices associated with just mastering content, they're step 1 activities; lots of creative ways of doing it but ultimately all it is is memorising […] Then there is step 2 activities, taking the information I've learned from step 1 and forging it into a working knowledge by using it under exam conditions, under pressure, to answer questions, solve problems, build arguments, write essays, deconstruct data, whatever, and then step 3, you take the results of step 2 and you mark it to see whether there was a problem with step 1, 'I just didn't know the stuff', or it was a problem with step 2, 'I knew the stuff, but I just screwed up the question, I'm not familiar enough with the way this question works and what a good answer looks like'. *And that's what good practice is, moving through those three phases*. […] you could say, 'Everyone, have a go at this', don't tell them that C is content, S is skills and F is feedback, they don't need to know that right now, just say, 'Tick always if it's something you find yourself doing almost, you know, two or three times a week. Tick sometimes if it's something you do, once a fortnight or perhaps once a half-term, and tick never if it's something you dip into maybe once a year' and see what happens […] There's quite a strong relationship between high grades and a breadth of 'always' stuff. Often what we find is comfortably double figures ticked always for high performing students. When we work with low performing students there have been some seriously weird, what looked to me like seriously weird behaviours, like three ticks in always, for example, across the 18 activities […] *often they've designed for themselves a poverty of personal curriculum that made study so dull that they just weren't making any progress*." (FN34, pp. 25-26, *my emphasis*)

Brook College's version of the "CSF questionnaire" can be seen in *Fig. 15.0.* below. The level of systematicity and consequent invitation to act strategically, in MG's talk and *Brook*'s version of the "CSF questionnaire", is plainly visible. This is another type of technologically individualising, autonomising and responsibilising "self-review" which necessarily produces pre-structured self-knowledge, here, in the form of "what activities are <u>missing</u> from **your**

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revision? *Which could you do <u>more</u> of?"* forcing students to look at themselves and their

study choices reconstructing learning as doing, and (re)moralising the link between personal

responsibility, success, doing (*more*).

:

What kind of revision do you do?

		Always	Sometimes	Never
Reading through class notes	C			
Using resources on Moodle	C			
Using course textbooks	C			
Mind maps/diagrams	C			
Making/re-making class notes	C			
Highlighting/colour coding	C			
Flashcards	C			
Using a revision wall to display your learning	C			
Writing exam answers under timed conditions	S			
Reading model answers	S			
Using past exam questions & planning answers	S			
Marking your own work to a mark scheme	F			
Studying mark schemes or examiner's reports	F			
Working with other students in groups/pairs	F			
Comparing model answers against your own work	F			
Creating your own exam questions	F			
Handing in extra exam work for marking	F			
1 to 1 discussions with teachers	F			

Fill in the table to see what kind of revision you currently do, how often, and where you can improve.

You will notice that some activities have 'C' next to them. These are the **CONTENT** techniques.

Some activities have an 'S' next to them. These are the **SKILLS** techniques.

Others have an 'F' next to them. These are the **FEEDBACK** techniques.

Why?

To revise efficiently and successfully, and make the most of your time, you need to balance your revision between all 3 types of activity. A student who does <u>20 hours of CONTENT</u> revision, will be <u>less successful</u> than a student who does <u>10 hours of CONTENT, SKILLS and FEEDBACK revision</u>.

Which activities are <u>missing</u> from your revision? Which could you do <u>more</u> of?

Fill in the table below...

What additional activities do you do (i.e. ones that aren't mentioned in the table overleaf)?	
Write a brief account of what you do when you can't understand something. (Try again, read textbooks, check Moodle, see teachers, see other students….etc.)	
Make a list of the key things you need to include in future to improve the way you study and revise.	

The Power Hour

Example: Student A has 1 hour to revise Case Study B for Geography.

She spends 30 minutes reviewing it - CONTENT

15 minutes doing a timed past paper exam question – SKILLS

15 minutes marking it using the mark scheme in order to see where she can improve her answer next time - FEEDBACK

Fig. 15.0. "What kind of revision do you do?" - "CSF Questionnaire"

MG also stated:

> "I think our job is to create high practice students; to push them out of content and
> push them into skills and feedback." (*ibid*, pp. 25)

The performative force and objective of MG's invocation of "to create" should not be lost on us

here. The logic in the 'CSF' activity is to "push" students to identify what they are not doing *enough*

of – evident in MG's comments about "low performing students" and their "seriously weird [*study*]

behaviours" judged quantitatively. The hierarchised focus on "skills", relative to "content", again

reinforces the idea of 'learning as doing*'* and, 'successful learning as *doing more*' supporting the

'truth' of MG's claim regarding the "strong relationship between high grades and a breadth of

'always' stuff". Likewise, a focus on "feedback", particularly the pre-structured, self-generated

feedback resulting from the CSF "self-review", cements students responbsibilisation through

essentialising and instrumentalising a specific form of reflexivity. This reconstruction of reflexivity

results in a continuous sense of performative anxiety/insecurity by making the fundamental

question students need to *ask themselves*, 'Am I doing *enough*? Am I doing the *right things*?'. This

'ontological insecurity' (Ball, 2003, pp. 220) provides a technological motor for students to engage in

self-work towards prescribed performative goals and forms a profound ethical regime of the self.

The document's guidance notes, too, support the moral-ethical connection of systematicity, self-

vision, acting strategically ("wisely") and "success" as exam performance students are meant to

understand:

> "*To revise efficiently and successfully, and make the most of your time*, you need to
> balance revision between all three types of activity. A student who does 20 hours of
> CONTENT revision, will be less successful than a student who does **10 hours of
> CONTENT, SKILLS and FEEDBACK revision.**" (*my emphasis*)

Ideas of working "efficiently" centrally implicate ideas of strategy, systematicity and pragmatic

instrumentality – all features of neoliberal discourses of performativity. There is also a curious lack

of ambiguity here. The second sentence frames hours spent on what type of activities as an absolute

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'truth'. The startling comment above – "often *they've designed for themselves* a poverty of personal curriculum" – illuminates students' repsonsibilisation not just for their performance, but also for their learning methods as evident in Maria's talk earlier. The word "poverty" is also noteworthy in its obvious intertextuality with ideas of financial security and wealth, as well as inferiority and insufficiency which, I believe, bring into sharp relief the highly performative, neoliberal framing context in which education is increasingly seen as an investment good towards securing long-term financial prosperity and social mobility. Burman (2018), drawing on Reyes (2011), suggests examining how "children figure in *hypothetical* futures" (pp. 419, *my emphasis*) and the ways in which these are mobilised to perform an "elision between child and societal development in order to render children as indicators of economic and social futurity" (*ibid*) corresponding to neoliberal rationalities of educational governance.

The reason students underperform is because they have "designed *for themselves*" a 'poor' ("poverty"), uninteresting, inefficient and/or ineffective system of learning. In the same ways as in "self-review", through the officially sponsored 'CSF questionnaire', students learn to become systematic and learn the categories through which they must understand and evaluate themselves and their learning, and their identity as learner-subjects. The goal is for students to design their own personalised curricula and system of learning along the lines of the practices accorded value by the college's conceptions of learning and success refracted through the "VESPA" model framed, primarily, by the logic of efficiency and effectiveness and become the kinds of learners this supposes.

This document (*and the myriad other forms of "self-review"*) act as a continuous feedback loop. In another context of 'feedback', senior members of staff particularly commented during interview that getting students to act on teacher and mentor feedback was a central objective of their implementation of A-Level Mindset. Christine noted:

> "*One of the key things is acting on feedback and actually making progress as a result of taking feedback on board* […] [*this is*] *not just meant to be a survey they do* […] *these are strategies for them to use* and we're doing quite a shift this year and pushing this, particularly at A-Level […] 'What do I need? Where did I go wrong? How do I need to do better?' to take that responsibility to do that and they've got to start acting on feedback; you need to do it." (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 24, *my emphasis*)

As she says, this is more than a revision survey, they are "strategies for them to use" – "'What do I need? Where did I go wrong? How do I need to do better?' […] take that responsibility". The problem of students failing to act on feedback 'and actually make progress as a result', as Christine felt, rendered teachers' work ineffective. Therefore, perhaps a significant purpose for the college's emphasis on students acting on feedback and demonstrating they had improved, is to legitimise their work and facilitate judgements of "impact" in the context of their professional (performative) accountability.

Importantly, here, the "key thing" is "feedback" and its essentialised relation to "progress". But, "feedback" in two senses: firstly, from teachers and mentors, and secondly, students own reflexive self-evaluations. Following a similar logic to "vision" as a self-styled, motivating life goal, making students generate their own feedback helps engender greater ownership of learning processes and reinforces personal responsibility and individualisation. "[F]eedback", conceptualised in these ways, is positioned as the motor of "progress". The summative goal, I believe, is creating fully independent (*i.e. responsibilised*), systematic and strategic, self-managing students by encouraging greater "self-discipline".

7.3.2.2. Resilience as "self-discipline"

During his welcome address to returning students embarking on their final year of A-Level study, the Principal discussed how "two thirds" were currently working at or above their expected/target

grades – *judged from internal assessments and AS exam results* – while noting all was not lost for the remaining third. He showed 'profiles' of three former students who had 'turned it around' in their A2 exams invoking ideas of resilience and suggesting what the "key to success" was:

> "If you are one of the students *who has yet to achieve their target grades,* do not despair. The slide behind me shows three recent examples of students who didn't achieve their potential in their AS exams but who went on to get much better results in their A2 exams, and this didn't happen by magic. This was, of course, through sustained hard work and dedication. *In fact, for all of you, the key to success in your A-levels is relatively simple really. First thing is basic coping strategies and systems for learning for you as an individual* […] *then having the self-discipline and determination to use those systems and strategies to practice the skills you will need to demonstrate to get maximum marks next summer.*" (FN12.1, pp. 2, *my emphasis*)

As he says, "the key to success […] *is relatively simple*"; or rather, simplified. It's "basic coping strategies and systems for learning for you as an individual" thereby conflating resilience and success (framed as getting "maximum marks") with systematicity and strategy in one move. Though, as he also notes, "systems and strategies" may only be successful if students possess the "*self-discipline* and determination *to use*" them. Furthermore, the expression "…*for you as an individual*" highlights students' individualisation under the guise of progressive educational discourses regarding 'personalisation' and 'student centred' pedagogy (Frankham & Hiett, 2011).

I believe the fundamental objective guiding interventions under the banner of "resilience", at *Brook College,* was to inculcate "self-discipline" in students via a range of officially sanctioned reflexive activities and technologies of the self. The college felt students' "resilience" could be improved by teaching them how to (more) effectively and efficiently manage themselves, their learning and affective responses according to the "VESPA" categories and so decrease their vulnerability to under-performance/under-achievement. By fostering greater self-control and -reliance through imposing the logics of systematicity, strategy and reflexive praxis, students are encouraged to self-correct (i.e. 'discipline' *themselves*) to prevent under-achievement. The logic of "self-discipline" as

resilience, then, is about responsibilising students with their own self-management, and embedding a permanent, formative ethic of self-correction and -improvement.

During an academic support session on the topic of "Ambition", the presenting tutor suggested "ambition" needed to be redefined as more than "a dream, an aim or a goal". He said:

> "…it's an important part of what ambition to have a goal, a dream, an aspiration, a desire, but this is what I think we mean by ambition: *'a strong desire and a determination to succeed'* […] [*having a goal will only get you so far*] The other part of ambition*, the desire, the determination, the drive will get you up to the top and success*. What I'm suggesting is that there are two ingredients to ambition; you need both to succeed." (FN45, pp. 2-5, *my emphasis*)

In this extract, we can see how this redefinition of "ambition" draws *on* the discourses of magnetic, purpose-giving "vision" while also drawing *in* ideas of "self-discipline" as "determination" and "drive". Both these terms can be located in the discursive frame of resilience as persistence and perseverance, understood as traits manifest from a motivating sense of purpose. To me, this is where "vision", 'learning as doing' and "self-discipline" connect. We saw in the analysis of "vision" how MG created "a distinction between those people who are comfortably in the dream position and those students who are in a position to make the outcome more likely" welding aspiration to action, i.e. physically doing something "to make the outcome more likely". Through this reconstruction of "ambition", "self-discipline" is about having "the determination, the drive" to act to "get to the top and success", thus supporting students' repsonsibilisation to engage in prescribed self-work *for* self-fulfilment.

Additionally, and I feel making it obvious these ideas converge into a profound governmental technology, the tutor finishes the session with tips about how students can *make themselves* more ambitious noting 'trainable' traits and characteristics they practice which increase ambition (*as he defines it*). Two are relevant here.

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Firstly, he notes "self-belief", saying: "You've got to believe in yourself, you've got to believe it and if you don't believe it then it ain't gonna happen". Secondly, he notes personal "responsibility" saying: "Stop waiting for it to happen! […] Make it happen" (*ibid*, pp. 10). Positioning "self-belief" as a determinant of ambition implies a specific restructuring of subjectivity suggesting students need to 'believe' in themselves *and* in the 'model' the tutor proposes. It is also key to note how responsibility, here, involves action and initiative, invokes will and volition, and implicitly stresses choice in self-determination.

Discussing "responsibility" further, the tutor showed the following slide which he stated drew on "a famous distinction in Psychology about internal and external locus of control" (*ibid*):
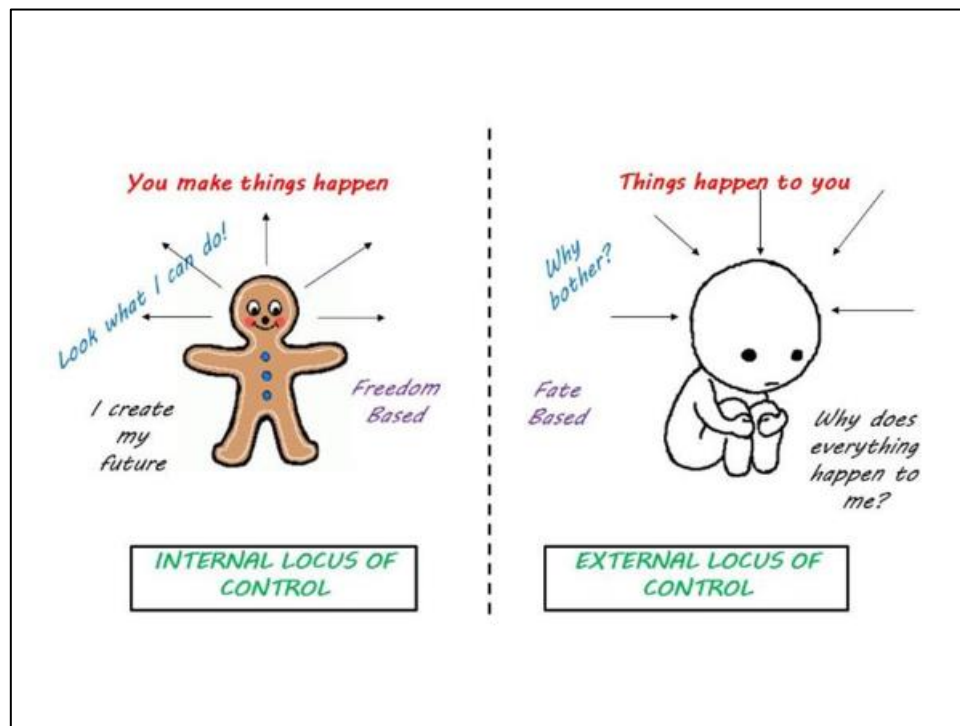
Fig. 16.0. "Ambition" Talk, slide 9: Internal/External Locus of Control

First, it should be noted how explicitly psychological/psychologised understandings of self-control are applied here to students' learning; this is just one example of the increasing colonisation of educational discourses with diluted neuroscientific and psychological theories and interventions. Tom Bennett (2017; *see* Bloom, 2017), founder of ResearchED, remarked in an article on the growing

implementation of Dweck's (2006) "growth mindset" theories in schools as following the "Chinese whisper effect" suggesting "…by the time it reaches the classroom, it's a pale interpretation […] amateur psychotherapy".

The obviously infantilised 'cartoon' design of the above slide reinforces the subject positions teacher/student, adult/child and/or expert/novice, and shapes power dynamics of this relationship. Likewise, the imbalanced graphics also facilitate the highly simplistic message students are meant to take from this – "internal locus of control" *good/happy*, "external locus" *bad/sad*. The 'happy' "internal locus of control" is defined as "freedom based" where "*you* make things happen" and "*I* create my own future" elevating "vision", self-control, autonomy and "self-realisation" that offers psychological-existential reward. This is contrasted to the 'sad' "external locus of control" where "things happen to you" supposing powerlessness, vulnerability, hopelessness, apathy and "despair" (FN12.1, pp. 2) – "why bother?". Importantly, this diagram encourages the production of a certain kind of subjectivity; one that stresses self-awareness and self-control, or -discipline. The tutor also said:

> "…there are two ends of this spectrum… *someone with a strong external locus of control attributes their failure to factors outside of themselves*. 'What's going to happen is going to happen, I've got very little control over it', you might believe in something like fate, like you were destined to get an E on that last essay […] *Bad things happen to you if you've got a really strong external locus of control*, on the other end though, other end of the spectrum, you take everything on board, you have complete responsibility for everything that happens to you. And, you know, that can be equally damaging to you. You can get serious anxiety if you take on board everything, and really take personal responsibility for everything that happens to you. So, it's about finding the right balance… […] So, taking responsibility, really key. It's about how much responsibility you take. They key thing there is, don't be afraid to change things. Like, how much of the things do you do on a daily basis do you think about why you're doing it? Or, do you think about why you are doing it the way you are? Do you just, in relation to study, do you just do things you've always

done? If so, why not mix things up a bit? Why not change things around?" (*ibid*, pp. 12)

Here, it is evident how responsibility links up to ideas of 'learning as doing' alongside the 'more (diverse) is better' logic underpinning the audit procedures embedded in the "CSF questionnaire". Likewise, it is also clear how this links up to the imperative to develop a systematic, strategic and instrumental form of self-vision highlighting the 'obviousness' of the need for students to critically act on themselves. As Christine said: "…it's about realising that *it's always about the student clearly needing to change* a bit and do a bit more" (IT1Christine – BC/ME, pp. 11). However, importantly, and nuancing the 'more (diverse) is better' logic, the above rhetorical questions encourage reflexive self-judgements based on quality supporting performative strategizing focusing on efficiency and effectiveness. The basic obligation to do more is clear; however, better still is critically reflecting, qualitatively, on ones' activities and "why you're doing it the way you are" to improve quality of outcomes and shape future action.

As it relates to resilience, the result of staffs' various interventions is that students learn (how to) be independent, self-disciplined learners who enact their obliged responsibility by taking control of themselves and their learning to mitigate unpredictability and produce their own performative security. Importantly, in doing so, students learn the skills of reflexive praxis for improvement. Students are not simply equipped with the means to identify when and why they have slipped into under-performance so they can self-correct. They are equipped with the self-disciplining strategies to *constantly* work on themselves to pursue *continuous* improvement and progress in a narrow image of success – "getting maximum marks next summer".

By subsuming a variety of student problematisations under the broad concept of resilience, in the context of success, students are more fully responsibilised to secure for themselves their own performance through psychologised, affective, managerial and entrepreneurial technologies. In this

manner, the college facilitates one of its central pedagogic missions – *achievement* – by creating a sub-structure of responsible, self-managing, self-disciplining, resilient learners.

So too, many of the problematics cited earlier are addressed. For instance, students who take "ownership" of their learning would appear to eradicate the institution-blaming "culture of entitlement". Increased responsibilisation also reduces students' dependence on teachers and encourages them to become more independent, better self-starters and self-managers thus reducing the need for, or expectation of, "spoonfeeding". Students are also better equipped to cope with the change from modular to linear A-Level exams and the performative risk this carries by applying a managerial systems logic to their learning and revision activities encouraging them to 'do more' in a strategic fashion. Likewise, responsibilisations and autonomisations such as the "internal locus of control" notion help 'address' rising student mental health issues by individualising and normalising an intensely performative culture of success and its problematic features *as well as* the (potentially) psychologically damaging but productive sense of 'ontological insecurity' this raises by locating problems in students' attitudes and responses to this culture. The variety of 'interventions' *Brook College* deploys in these respects all facilitate the overriding institutional objective of achievement by governmentalizing students', producing them as specific learner-subjects and encouraging the uptake of technologies of the self aligned to those ends. In this sense, the college fulfils *its* objectives by encouraging students to fulfil *themselves* in officially sponsored ways towards institutionally defined performative goals – i.e. exam success.

Discourses and practices associated with resilience fundamentally work at restructuring students' subjectivity to focus entirely on themselves, and rather shrewdly, both accounts for and ignores the impact of social f/actors positioned as 'beyond' the individual and 'out of their control'. Joseph (2013, pp. 40) notes:

> "Resilience fits with a social ontology that urges us to turn away from a concern with the outside world to a concern with our own subjectivity, our adaptability, our

reflexive understanding, our own risk assessments, our knowledge acquisition, and
above all else, our responsible decision making."

This corresponds to a neoliberal rationality of governance which stresses the best, most efficient and effective way of governing society is by individuals governing themselves through greater self-awareness supporting the focus on individualised responsibility, flexibility and adaptability. Practices of/for (increasing) resilience, as such, become mechanisms for increasing "self-discipline" and self-control in an increasingly complex, unpredictable, threatening and unequal world. Systemic social and structural inequalities and problems then become matters addressed to the individual to render benefits at the level of 'society'.

The expansive concept of resilience acts as a nodal point in discourses of responsibility around which a variety of problematisations of students, in the context of academic performance, and interventions find legitimacy. The discursive portmanteau of resilience (*see* Coffield, 2002, pp. 41) represents a reconstruction of the 'reality' of education such that it supports itself and demands certain complementary subjectivities and technologies of the self. *Brook College*'s implementation of Mindset around the concept of "resilience" represents a 'new' rationality, or specific "intellectual technology" (Rose, *et al.,* 2006, pp. 89), (re)conceptualising students and learning only to the extent it reifies its own logic, legitimises certain pedagogic interventions and commands adoption of corresponding subjectivities which encourage the production of self-managing and -disciplining, responsible students who claim total "ownership" of their outcomes.

8.1. Endpoints (1): *Interpretive reflections*

In this section, I wish to further reflect on the substantive data and interpretations brought up in this thesis' analytic chapters considering their potential wider implications in the context of prevailing forces and features shaping the contemporary landscape of HE in the UK. Primarily, I explore ideas regarding the impacts of neoliberalism and performativity in relation to the previous analyses which address the following *broad* questions: Who are the students of HE today? What appear to be their priorities? How is (higher) education constructed and experienced by today's students? How are they 'prepared' for HE, and what are the rationalities driving these forms of preparation? In what ways might the changing landscape of HE connect to the production of these learners? And, what are the implications of these reflections on the very nature of what HE *is* (for) today?

8.1.1. Skills: *Learning as Investment*

The apparent necessity for students to speak in the "language of skills" (Bridges, 1993, pp. 44) and, initially, their perceived inability to do so in their personal statements, resulted in college staff devoting a great deal of time and effort to correctively training students in the 'proper' ways to produce a 'good' personal statement. However, as shown, this did not come without its problems. Students 'struggled' learning the lingo, learning the tropes and learning how to put these new understandings in action to perform they were "what they're looking for". Mentors, too, noted their frustrations supporting students through this activity because they felt students failed to understand the dominant, conventional ways they were *required* to speak and perform themselves owing to perceived deficits in literacy and inexperience in recruitment. In short, they didn't know how to 'sell themselves' *properly*.

To me, those 'struggles' and 'frustrations' indicate that what was taking place through the imperative for "skills talk" (*ibid*, pp. 43) in the personal statement was a fundamental

(re)structuration of students' subjectivity; or at least, evidence of the production of 'new' subjectivity. Students initially 'struggled' to master the "language of skills" (*ibid*) and its proper use because they were "learning to work within a received frame" (Bernstein, 1971, pp. 240-241). This 'new' "received frame", which at first was difficult for students to understand and assimilate but which seemed 'obvious' to mentors, was the (governmentalizing) discourse of skills.

Through the lengthy drafting process and mentors' incessant refocusing to skills in feedback, students were gradually taught the proper ways they were required to understand their learning, and themselves as learners, and obliged to adopt a 'new' and essential form of understanding education and a new mode of self-(re)presentation based exclusively on the instrumental rationality of skills development.

Through their "skills talk", students are encouraged to conceive of education – *its processes, its general object/s and the specific 'products' of learning* (even the assumption that education has products, in this way) – primarily in terms of the practical and behavioural capacities and abilities they 'make' and/or develop through their engagement in educational, extra-curricular and work-based activities. This 'demand', then, facilitates a highly instrumental reframing of learning along a technicalised input-output investing model of skill acquisition/accumulation and development in a lifelong project of "self-actualisation". That is, through the discursive rationality of skills and instrumentalism, students are positioned within a specific 'regime of truth' and produced as certain kinds of learners imbued with specific priorities aligned towards specific governmental ends. Ball & Olmedo (2013, pp. 88) use Peck & Tickell's (2002) idea that neoliberal discourses are, in this sense, both 'out there' and 'in here': "Neoliberalism […] 'does us' – speaks and acts through our language, purposes, decisions and social relations (Ball, 2012)." Discourses are productive and constitutive; they 'speak (through) us' and thereby structure our subjectivities facilitating our production (and our production *of ourselves*) as certain kinds of subjects who view and act in the world in ways corresponding to the dominant discourses and their objectives.

When the acquisition and development of technical capacities (i.e. skills) are positioned as the primary 'object/s' and tangible 'product/s' of 'successful' learning, this reinforces the parallel technical-behavioural reconstruction of learning 'as doing' which, as shown, formed a significant discursive motif of the A-Level Mindset programme.

On this skills-based model, learning is about "doing, not knowing". The practical, utilitarian rhetoric of skill/s emphasises 'know how' stressing action over thought. Learning, then, is about (being seen to) physically 'do' something rather than inertly and invisibly 'know' something, thus satisfying the visibility demanded in self-reflective activities required to facilitate students' own performance monitoring. Locke (2015, pp. 248) suggests that, as cognates of performativity, all meanings of performance "have a 'doing' element, delineated by some kind of 'event' […] that can be measured by time and cost." Following Lyotard (1984), Locke (*op cit*, pp. 251) argues that through the systemic efficiency-'doing' logic of performativity, "[i]nstrumental reason is elevated to a status that validates its legitimation through competence and utility, which in turn validates instrumentality." Thus, the performative and instrumental logic of skills is circular and autotelic; "self-legitimating" (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 47). In this way, Locke suggests, education is fundamentally shaped by the principles of performativity and performativity is reinforced through education recursively. The rationality of skills and the rhetoric of 'learning as doing', perhaps, performs a similar double hermeneutic.

It is important too, I feel, to reflect on what this reframing of learning exclusively around skills might mean for pedagogy, practice and, the role and work of teachers/mentors. One of the most commonly cited critiques of such outcome-oriented, skills-based framing of curricula and their associated pedagogies is that they appear more like training than education. This is because, in training (*as opposed to education*), the emphasis is on behaviour, repetition, the formation of habit and (self-)discipline, that diverge with ideas of democracy, fostering 'true' autonomy and critical consciousness raising that, historically, have been cited as the primary moral 'objects' of education (*see* Devine & Irwin, 2005; Giroux, 1988; Freire, 1975/2005, 1970/1993; Dewey, 1986, 1916/2011).

Locke (2015, pp. 257, *my emphasis*) suggests that, operating under the 'rules' of performativity: "Education is no longer concerned with the *pursuit of ideals* revolving around emancipatory themes but is now more concerned with the *pursuit of skills…*". Crucially though, as Davis (2003) points out, this is not to assume training is bad; rather, "[t]he question becomes, 'What's wrong with training [*in this sense*]?'" (pp. 38).

Of course, there is nothing inherently 'wrong' with training; so the question, then, is: *what is wrong with reframing education as training?* Stenhouse (1975) argues that an outcome-oriented curricular model fits well with a training model evident in approaches used by the army (*see also*, Davis, 2003, pp. 38) and in industry where precision of objectives and certainty of outcomes are key, and the overall goal is performance expressed behaviourally through technical competence, i.e. skill. Precision and certainty, in this sense, I believe, are corollaries of efficiency and effectiveness; themselves central imperatives guiding investment-style thinking and two of the most elemental performative principles as Locke, above, implies following Lyotard.

But, such focus on skills perhaps also (re)constructs teachers (and, in a different way, mentors) in different social and professional roles, and as such, they will perform themselves and the practice of education/teaching in subtly different ways. For instance, from a more technicalised, 'doing' model of learning, teachers and mentors become more alike 'trainers' or 'coaches' than educators whose primary duties are then instruction, facilitation and empowerment reinforcing and compounding students' autonomisation and responsbilisation. It should be no surprise, then, that an entire chapter of the A-Level Mindset book is devoted to encouraging the adoption of a pedagogy of "coaching" throughout institutions where the focus is on "getting students to do something tangible" with the object of "behaviour change" (Oakes & Griffin, 2016, pp. 124.) Surely enough, then, this would align more so with a training model rather than a purely educational one.

Towler, Woolner & Wall (2011) argue a performative, outcome-oriented "instrumentalisation of the curriculum" (pp. 505) focusing on valued 'outputs' like skills, impacts both "the character and purpose of the curriculum" (Bridges, 1993, pp. 44) – and I would contend, the supposed 'character and purpose' of teachers and teaching. These authors suggest this then impacts the very concept of "what counts in learning" posing a significant "challenge to traditional concepts of Liberal Education" (Towler, Woolner & Wall, 2011, pp. 502; 505) such as those highlighted earlier. These authors highlight how such "instrumentalisation" emergent from and evident in an institutional "ethos of performativity" (pp. 501) among teachers, led many students to adopt somewhat "'simplistic'" models and "surface definitions" (*ibid*) of learning predominantly based around demonstrating target behaviours, traits and the use of practical 'skills' such, as "practising, remembering and […] listening." (pp. 510) – ideas often not synonymous with 'deeper' concepts and articulations of learning. In this sense, they argue that "an emphasis on quantifiable outputs", such as assessment data and exam grades, has the potential to "distort learning […] to the extent that arguably much of importance is set aside (James & Biesta 2007)." (pp. 504).

Macfarlane (2015, pp. 338), drawing on Skeggs' (2009) analysis of different forms of performance/s, conceptualises the "performative pressures" of "presenteeism", "learnerism" and "soulcraft" (pp. 339) facing HE students, which I feel could be helpful here. "Presenteeism", for Macfarlane (2015), invokes a pressure for effort, to work harder and longer "as some kind of moral responsibility with pragmatic self-interest" (pp. 340) in mind required for students to visibly – with their physical presence – demonstrate their 'investment' (pp. 346) in the learning enterprise. "Learnerism", an idea adopted from Holmes (2004), refers to "an ideological discourse which is performative in nature…" (pp. 341). Macfarlane links "learnerism" with performative discourses closely associated to 'student centred' learning, and the production of particular learner-subjects, which he suggests "is normally assumed to incorporate expectations that students *actively* 'engage' and 'manage' their own learning." (*ibid, my emphasis*). Importantly, MacFarlane says, because of the 'active', doing

element: "Learnerism emphasises the need for the student to be publicly 'seen' to be learning […] the learner is a 'do-er' of learning' (Holmes, 2004, pp. 627)." suggesting that, today, students are "now expected to demonstrate more visibly *that they are 'learning'*" (pp. 339, *my emphasis*) – perhaps more apparent and necessary for today's students as a result of the institutional 'need' to satisfy proliferating performance (self-)monitoring and academic tracking systems used to continuously assess them and their 'progress'. To me, there are clear parallels in MacFarlane's theorisations to the outwardly 'visible' rationality of skills and the 'active' performative rhetoric of 'learning as doing' – especially apparent in the discourse of "effort" that we saw was defined physically and quantitatively. Given MacFarlane's analysis of HE students and my own analysis of 6th form students at *Brook College*, we could perhaps see some parallels in how these students' time in the *College* functions as an induction, or socialisation, phase into the types of "performative pressures" they will encounter in university and the subjectivities they may be required to adopt to perform and succeed. "Ironically" though, Macfarlane remarks, "…the skills required to succeed in university and beyond, may run counter to assumptions that deep, conceptual approaches to learning are superior to surface or strategic approaches." (pp. 342). And, again, we can see how the A-level Mindset in particular encourages and perhaps even disciplines students to become specific kinds of learner-subjects who adopt these "surface or strategic approaches" to their learning, especially to studying and revision in the lead up to all-important A-Level exams.

Indeed, as noted in sections on resilience problematisations constructed around students, pastoral mentors I feel highlighted the paradox of "deep, conceptual approaches" relative to "surface or strategic approaches" when they both decried 'spoon-feeding' but yet appeared somewhat resigned to such practices and their complicity in them – like 'drilling for the exam' due to the pressures for achievement the institution and its professionals felt as a result of their felt-accountability to the "higher powers". It may be that teachers, mentors and a host of other education professionals, in a manner of speaking, are caught in a 'Catch 22' situation.

From my own experience in *Brook College*, my knowledge of the mentors, teachers, support staff and their work, many professionals intimated a sense of critical awareness regarding (what they saw as) the frailties and problematics, as well as promises and potentialities, of their jobs and of contemporary education. Yet, in the same breath, many also showed a clear sense of resignation, sometimes apathy and despondency, at their perceived professional power(lessness) to significantly impact aspects of their work and professional roles that were either decided just out of reach in the offices of *Brook* senior leadership or well above them in elusive machinations of governmental bodies. I feel this 'played out' in a distinct absence of instances of resistance – at least, in overt or explicit ways – among staff, such as the imposition of new "100% [*student*] pass rate" targets for mentors that many thought were unrealistic.

Again, Ball's (2003) work may be instructive here. Tied, I believe, to his notion of 'ontologic insecurity', earlier Ball (*ibid*) explores the kinds of ambivalences that emerge with regards to teachers attempts at reconciling their identities, beliefs about learning and teaching practice with each other as a result of their positioning by the competing rationalities and 'value(s)' of education amid performativity. Ball (*ibid*, pp. 221-222, emphasis in original) suggests what happens to the teacher/professional is that they may experience a "kind of *values schizophrenia* […] where commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance. Here there is a potential 'splitting' between the teachers own judgements about 'good practice' and students 'needs' and the rigours of performance […]. There are indications here of the particular performativity – the management of performance […]. What is produced is a spectacle, or game-playing, or cynical compliance, or what one might see as an 'enacted fantasy' (Butler 1990), which is there simply to be seen and judged."

I think it would be reasonable to think the same thing with regards to the teachers and mentors at *Brook College* I spoke to*.* On the one hand, I am in no doubt that many felt they 'knew' what 'good

practice' and/or 'deep' learning is or should be, had strong ideas about the purposes and 'ideals' of education, and what it should 'produce' in both teacher and student, and yet, they felt increasingly hemmed in by policy and practice agendas and the performative imperatives of audit and accountability that followed on from them. I sensed many felt torn between one idea of 'good teaching' on the one hand, and an imperative to ensure their students' success on the other.

Though, I feel this 'schizophrenic' subjectivity was routinely repressed as it was often accompanied by deep seated personal and philosophical articulations of teaching as a vocation and their 'teacherly' role, or identity, as vocational – characterised by a certain devotion to their students and a willingness to submit personal and/or political beliefs, about their jobs and roles, to the pragmatics of *students'* performative needs in the system as it stood. Many teachers talked about how critical students' time at *Brook College* was in terms of their long-term outcomes (as evident in the underpinning rationality of the technology of "vision"). Many noted how they felt their role was to 'make a difference' in students' lives and this formed a significant ethic underpinning their ideas about the purpose of teaching and their educational practice, and what it meant to be a 'teacher'.

As MacLure (1989; 1993, pp. 331) states of identity – specifically a teacherly professional identity – it could be thought of as insecure; as a "form of argument" (pp.312). This conception perhaps provides added sense to the 'competition', or tension, between the competing rationalities of education and performativity that constitute the role and identity of the professional as insecure, fragmented and contradictory. As Ball (2003) argues, it is this tension and the insecurity it produces that leads to "game-playing, or cynical compliance", that encourage strategy and tactic, pragmatism and, ultimately, inauthenticity – both in practice and with regards their 'felt' identity. Certainly, we saw in the analysis of personal statements just how the 'game' was being played and in doing so, subverted through tacitly satisfying the conventions and expectations in little acts of 'gaming the game' and "cynical compliance" – like mentors' advice of 'how to word it' to hide or obscure students'

deviation from the norms of course choice that risked 'exposing' them as unconfident, uninformed, unfocused or lacking passion; or to the minor practices of plagiarism, copying and 'pinching' students and mentors rationalised and used to ensure success; or in economic advice to 'read around'; or even more explicitly, in Stephen's notion of "*fake* passion".

To neglect in any analysis that teachers and other professionals are not, in essence, exposed to and affected by the same kinds of discourses and pressures as their students risks privileging and deifying the 'student' at the expense of the professional, and would be a gravely biased empirical position. It could indeed be that this common 'neglect' might also contribute to problematics other researchers have noted with regards the contemporary neoliberal devaluation of the profession of teaching and the status of teachers. And, this goes alongside the increasing de-professionalisation of teaching through a more explicit standardisation of practice (*especially among new initial teacher trainees*) and focus on the 'what works' pragmatic logic of performativity.

Bourke *et al*. (2015, pp. 85) suggests, however, that as opposed to teachers' de-professionalisation this might represent the 'masquerade' of a "'new' professionalism". Or, if not 'new' – as 'professionalism' is not "a singular phenomenon that everyone experiences in the same way" (*ibid,* pp. 86) – perhaps the emergence of a kind of "parallel professionalism" (Johnson, 2014, pp. 79). Stronach *et al.* (2002) challenge traditional and more contemporary discourses of 'professionalism' among teachers and nurses by situating them in a site of tension and resistance between, what they term, "economies of performance" and "ecologies of practice" (pp. 121) that they argue "threaten[*s*] the 'end' of a certain notion of professionalism" (pp. 130). The authors 'conclude' that the conflict between *economies* and *ecologies* in effect:

> "…sustain[s] 'professionalism' in crisis […] One conclusion is that the nature of the
> current 'economy of performance' and its corrosive relation with ecologies of
> practice offer to professionals such an impoverished intellectual and practical diet
> that professional lives cannot be sustained" (pp. 131)

In this way, Stronach *et al.* proclaim "the ends of professionalism" (pp. 130) suggesting that, now, "[p]rofessionals *must* re-story themselves in and against the audit culture. […] If professionalism is to be 'risked' once more, such a risk will involve re-negotiating an economy of performance from *within* professional ecologies of practice." (pp. 130-131, emphasis in original). Perhaps, these are pertinent 'starting points' on which future research regarding the nature and practices of contemporary education professionals might (re)focus in these intensified neoliberal and performative times.

Constanti & Gibbs (2004) have argued that, now more so than ever before, the moral, ethical and emotional nature of teachers and their work has been neglected in public policy that seeks, above all else, to assess them and their work. In a similar way, Jeffrey (2002) argues that the conventional 'humanistic' and vocationalist (identity) discourses historically available to teachers have been suppressed by an educational policy culture that seeks to prioritise standards of professionalism and practice, stresses technical competencies and abilities, and thus produces hierarchized and depersonalised identities and relationships more compatible with the demands of performativity. I would argue that as opposed to the vocational, moral and emotional aspects of teachers/teaching being *suppressed* and elided through policy, these dimensions of teacher's identities, roles and work have become more completely *colonised* by the technicist epistemes and rubrics of performance, serving to fundamentally alter the nature of the profession, along with the practice and identity of its professionals.

> "The space for the operation of autonomous ethical codes based in a shared moral language is colonized or closed down. This, thus, plays its part in what Sennett (1998) calls the 'corrosion of character' and what Power (1994) terms a 'regress of mistrust'. The policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self." (Ball, 2003, pp. 226)

Ball's thoughts here may also provide some added context for my own observations regarding the apparent lack of acts of resistance or subversion – at least among staff. I would encourage others to

interrogate this idea further and examine notions of a de- and/or subsequently 'newly' re-professionalised education workers and how this relates to the performative cultures in which they must exist and function. Perhaps, work of this nature could gently break the increasingly exclusive focus on students at the expense of professionals. Other studies might consider, in the context of intensifying performative cultures, exploring what changes might be being effected to education as a profession and to the professional identities of 'teachers', and what impacts these may have on the practice of teaching and on the production of learners in this contemporary climate.

Returning to the unfolding 'endpoints' here, we can see that when learning is (re)constructed/reframed as a means-end, 'doing' model of skill acquisition and development, then (pro)activity and utility are privileged above all else. This is evident in aspects of the A-Level Mindset programme such as in the 'more (diverse) is better' logic embedded in the variety of "self-review" procedures and in the implicit stimulus for self-work resulting from the 'ontologic insecurity' (Ball, 2003, pp. 220) I feel these procedures produce.

Fundamentally, then, I believe the discursive instrumental rationality of skills encourages students to treat "learning as [*an*] investment*" (*see* Simons, 2006; Canaan, 2004). The young people at *Brook College,* through the focus on skills, are encouraged, and therefore implicitly obliged given their relatively diminished power in the pedagogic relationship, to understand and conduct their engagement in education as a kind of strategic investment activity that offers 'returns' in the form of skills which, in the context of HE admissions, they are told have an imputed 'value' in its economy and will "encapsulate or represent the[ir] worth, quality or value…" (Ball, 2003, pp. 216).

Through the kinds of personal statement advice they receive, students are encouraged to view their studies, and conduct their learning, much more strategically and entrepreneurially (*see*, Peters, 2001; Rose, 1996; Fairclough, 2001; Selden, 1991; Keat & Abercrombie, 1991). Given the absolute importance of skills talk in the personal statement and the importance of skills in the rationality of the A-Level Mindset programme, students begin to understand that skills *are* the terms upon which

their 'value' in admissions and the 'value' of learning itself are constituted/produced. Consequently, students appreciate that to increase their 'value' they must work (on themselves) to acquire new or enhance their existing skills, and learn how to (better) 'sell themselves' using this discursive register. This necessarily encourages investment-style thinking, strategic action and performative fabrications. Especially in the context of what they are told is one of the personal statement's most important tasks – *being "what they're looking for"* – and given the time afforded by a protracted drafting process, students learn to become more strategic, pragmatically calculative and, essentially, entrepreneurial (*even inauthentic*). The idea of 'relevant evidence', I think, is a good example.

Judgements of 'relevance' are qualitative and implicitly require students adopt a pragmatically calculative and instrumental view of their educational and extra-curricular activities in terms of what could provide the best means of demonstrating they possess the skills defining the 'ideal' candidate they must show themselves to be. Therefore, students' skills talk in their personal statements are strategic performances; they are specifically crafted displays enacted *for* other people (i.e. mentors and admissions tutors) *for* specific purpose/s (i.e. gaining offers for their chosen courses) further posing the question of (in)authenticity.

The logic of 'relevance' also constructs the idea that differential value is accorded to different activities and experiences, and thus those who undertake them, in terms of the 'skills capital' they offer relative to a specific course or academic disciplinary community, elevating an ethic of choice making them become ever more discerning "choosers" and importantly, "refusers" (Southgate & Bennett, 2015). Students, as such, begin to learn that some activities offer greater potential for them to craft more desirable/attractive performances and thus, are of greater value, leading them to become more pragmatic and strategic about their choice (and refusal) of, and relative investment in, certain activities to add value necessitating a focus on the performative imperatives of efficiency and effectiveness.

We can see these kinds of strategic performative imperatives in some mentors' feedback suggestions regarding the things students could do to 'look good' on their personal statements (Shuker, 2014) – such as, 'reading around' but only to the extent it engenders the desired perceptual effects, or, tactical advice about how to "word" statements to 'hide' diverse course choices. Of course, these kinds of advice and practice are *economic* and necessarily demand a corresponding investing attitude relative to cost/benefit. For instance, 'reading around' is economic in that it implies a pragmatic calculation about the time/effort cost of reading relative to the 'return' of demonstrating passion, enthusiasm and academic interest. Tactical advice about how to 'word' their statements is also economic in the sense of being economic with the 'truth'. Students relaxed ethics about plagiarism, 'pinching', 'making things up' or 'bending the truth' regarding the types of activities and experiences they actually undertook, could also be read in this way. Fairclough (2010, pp. 100) references the "problem of trust" and authenticity in his analysis of universities' promotional materials suggesting that, "[i]n terms of the characteristics of promotional discourse […] meaning would seem to be subordinate to effect" (pp. 112). And, this fits neatly with Ball's (2000, pp. 9) notion of performative "fabrications": "Truthfulness is not the point – the point is their effectiveness…".

This, I believe, is the reason why so many *Brook* students seek to become student ambassadors or undertake an EPQ (Extended Project Qualification) or complete the Duke of Edinburgh Award and why *all* students are encouraged to undertake a great deal of preferably prestigious or high-status professional work experience relevant to their course choices. It is not because of the intrinsic 'value' of leadership, 'tasters' of the professional world, self-directed learning or other educational experiences. It is simply because many valuable/valued skills can be harvested from these activities permitting the crafting of desirable performances. They are indeed the same reasons why many students *do not* choose to participate in some of the many extra-curricular activities the college offers – simply, because they are perceived to be less directly useful, less valuable investments in the context of performing their value and securing success in admissions. It is also perhaps, in part, the

same reason why students (and mentors) feel at ease 'making things up' to put in their personal statements – this is the most efficient type of investment that produces the desired effect without 'input'.

Another (deeply ironic) example of this comes from the support class on 'Ambition' introduced in the analysis of resilience. Here, students were told about other support sessions on offer regarding "mindfulness" and coping with "stress and anxiety" (FN46, pp. 15-16) around exam time. While "resilience" (intertextually connected to discourses of "mindfulness") and issues of mental wellbeing were positioned as central to (continued) academic performance and achievement by staff, relatively few students actually attended these sessions. Bluntly stated: students I spoke to saw them as a less 'productive' use of their limited time and energy relative to the potential 'return' in performative terms, including the marketable skills they offered and their perceived relevance (i.e. 'value') to the academic-disciplinary communities they sought entry to.

Shuker (2014, pp. 239) argues that an instrumental reframing of learning through the rhetoric of skills leads many students adopt a more "prospective orientation" that encourages "strategic thinking in the present in order to shape future possibilities". More of a "prospective orientation" to a university course or profession in this context, Shuker says, leads some to strategically choose investment in certain activities over others because they offer a better opportunity to 'self-market' and "stand out". Likewise, in Fairclough's (2010, pp. 100) examination of "self-promotion" in CVs – something which, as shown, exhibits significant intertextuality with the personal statement – he remarks that "ones future promotability may become a significant factor in the planning of ones' current activities" (pp. 110-111). And, further still, we can see the parallels in this kind of "prospective" strategizing and conduct with the discursive rationality of the technology of "vision".

Through its (pedagogical) discursive hegemony, skills become the principle of intelligibility and 'value' of students and learning, producing education in characteristic ways and students, alongside,

as certain kinds of learners who complement this by conducting their education through specific performative and managerialist practices, and in relation to their embedded priorities.

8.1.2. 'Value-Added'

The above reflections, I feel, also connect with educational-political discourses regarding 'value-added'. While the notion of 'value added' in everyday educational talk refers to the nationally benchmarked value-added*ness* of an institution to its students as they progress through their education, I think the idea can also be usefully applied to reflecting on students' responsibilisations to 'add value' to themselves, produce their own competitiveness (i.e. "stand out") and secure performative success.

Many students I spoke with felt that the possible scope for their differentiation in admissions was slim. As implied in the need to make oneself "stand out", students appreciate that success in A-Level examinations, while an absolute necessity, is generally insufficient to differentiate them cementing the apparent importance of the personal statement and the pre-eminent position of skills talk in self-marketing. Many students also felt that, beyond grades, a great deal of difficulty was involved in trying to *make themselves* "stand out" from other students applying for the same courses, likely studying similar A-Levels and who may have similar experiences and skills to discuss. Tomlinson's (2008) study of HE students' perceptions of the 'value' of a degree suggests similar ideas, evidenced alone by the article's title: '*The degree is not enough*'. So too, it seems for *Brook* students, A-Levels are 'not enough'.

Students were told by their mentors that their experiences and skills would be the primary means by which they could construct and perform their bridled and contrived exceptionality, highlighting the ramifying identity implications of practices of self-promotion (Fairclough, 2010). As such, skills (*not credentials*) occupied a position of profound importance in constructing ones' identity (as a

'student') and performing ones' 'value'. Again, Tomlinson's (2008) work appears to (indirectly) corroborate this 'insufficiency thesis' regarding the neoliberal devaluation of credentials compared to skills. This is perhaps precisely the undergirding logic driving universities focus on 'employability skills' that now appear to constitute a dominant focus of HE curricula; the degree itself is no longer 'enough'.

In another sense of 'adding value', this is where the instrumentalised reflexivity encouraged by "self-review" procedures comes into focus *Brook College* students are continually required to reflect on themselves and their learning along externally prespecified categories that primarily focus on practical skill/s and learning behaviours ("habits") facilitating them to identify and remediate their shortcomings themselves, for themselves. These reflexive procedures encourage students to achieve greater oversight and, importantly, control of themselves and their learning so they can begin to become better self-managers by acting more strategically deciding where and how they need to work on themselves to improve academic performance, and as such enhance their 'value' in admissions, by developing their skills and modifying their behaviour iteratively. Put another way, students are more completely responsibilised with the continuous management and production (and enhancement of) their 'value', and therefore success/es, via the technological managerial procedures of audit and self-work. Keddie (2016, pp. 109, *my emphasis*) says:

> "*This then is the ideal neoliberal subject*; one who actively and purposefully crafts their identity to be worthy against these parameters of success. Such crafting involves much work on the self in terms of developing skills and engaging in activities that add 'value' and that lead to self enhancement (see Apple, 2001; Ball, 2003; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Francis, Skelton & Read, 2009; O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007; Rose, 1989)."

In this respect, it could be argued that students are being taught a complex of essential neoliberal practices – technologies of governance taken up as technologies of the self – such as the instrumentalised 'skill' of reflexivity they require to continuously succeed in an individualised

neoliberal, performative life that demands self-sufficiency and -management in a lifelong (identity) project of "self-actualisation".

Furthermore, when being a "superstar" – defined exclusively in terms of exam success – is institutionally venerated, when these rarefied individuals are 'valued' above others and their visible characteristics and behaviours held up as a(nother) kind of 'model' (*the 'model student' perhaps*), this becomes the categorical 'ideal' all students are positioned relative to and encouraged to work towards (becoming). As noted in the analysis of A-Level Mindset too, this post hoc reconstruction also reinforced the pedagogical 'model' itself including its definitions of students, learning and success.

Simons' (2006, pp. 532) analysis of "learning as investment" using the analytics of governmentality and the "entrepreneurial self" is instructive here. Simons notes that an:

> "…entrepreneurial relation to the self is a main component of the actual regime of the self, i.e. a regime in which we are [*constantly*] asked to judge what we are doing on the basis of a 'permanent economic tribunal' and to see in the submission to this tribunal the condition of our freedom (as self-actualisation or self-development)."

The ethical imperative of the "entrepreneurial self" to submit all decisions to the "'permanent economic tribunal'" (*see* Foucault, 2004, pp. 253), Simons argues, is connected by the idea of 'learning as investment' – and I would add, instrumentalised reflexivity for self-work. As Simons suggests, this forms a "regime of the self" that demands individuals embed a continuous ethic of self-directed self-maximisation via instrumentalised reflexive awareness and investing-style decisions and behaviours. This, as Simons also notes, is part of the very "condition of our freedom" within neoliberalism. Rose (1996, 1989) argues this kind of entrepreneurial responsibilisation and autonomisation to conduct one's life as an enterprise (of the self) forms a central plank of advanced liberal governmentalities he elsewhere terms "governing at a distance" (Rose, *et al.,* 2006, pp. 89). Rose (1996, pp. 22) therefore suggests it is necessary to examine the:

> "…categories and explanatory schemes according to which we think ourselves, the criteria and norms we use to judge ourselves, the practices through which we act upon ourselves and one another in order to make us particular kinds of being."

That is, *performativity*. Through such an entrepreneurial investing model, students are produced as "particular kinds of being" fully-responsibilised with their own long-term "self-actualisation" achieved via the adoption of technologies of the self that embed a permanent formative ethic so they can continuously 'add value' to themselves. In "self-review", for example, students are interpellated as autonomous, self-directed/ing and self-managing learners and self-actualising subjects. Indeed, you will recall the very idea of "self-actualisation" was a significant discursive trope used by mentors to express the assumed benefits of the A-Level Mindset, particularly "vision".

We could, perhaps, even link this instantiation of a permanent formative, essentially entrepreneurial, ethic of "self-actualisation" and continuous improvement to discourses of lifelong learning. Coffield (2002) has suggested the "vacuous slogan" (pp. 39) of 'learning to learn' "is highly reminiscent of the attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to teach the concept of 'enterprise'" (pp. 41). Perhaps the 'skill' of instrumentalised reflexivity students learn could also be located in lifelong learning discourses. Perhaps, it could be even more generally construed as an essential 'skill' for neoliberal life. Interestingly, Coffield (*ibid*) also suggests that "resilience" is one of enterprise discourses' routine "farrago of 'hurrah words'" (*see also,* Coffield, 1990, p. 67) – maybe showing just how prophetic his analysis was.

Peters (2001, pp. 66) remarks that the governmental rationality that gave rise to 'enterprise culture' in the 1980s and 90s, later reformed and embedded by successive governments, in poststructural terms, represented a will to impose a "new neo-liberal metanarrative" and totalising ideological "vision of the future". This governmentalising "metanarrative" and "vision" positioned personal responsibility for self-maximisation and fulfilment through privatised investment in "'skills training'" (*ibid*, pp. 66) and credentialing through education as the keys to addressing the then emerging socio-economic exigencies an increasingly competitive, technologically-driven, globalised 'knowledge

economy'. And, since these prevailing global(ising) 'forces' have only become more acute in the intervening period, it would be reasonable to argue that their associated imperatives have only become more intensified and naturalised in education.

Rose (1996, pp. 6; 21; 23) frames the argument as such:

> "…the vocabulary of enterprise links political rhetoric and regulatory programmes to the 'self steering' capacities of subjects themselves. […] …*enterprise forges a link between the ways we are governed by others and the ways we should govern ourselves*. […] We can now be governed by the choices that we will ourselves make […] in the space of regulated freedom, in our individual search for happiness and the fulfilment of our autonomous selves. […] …*I have argued that the potency of a notion of an 'enterprise culture', however short-lived its particular vocabulary might prove to be, is that it embodies a political programme grounded in, and drawing upon, the new regime of the autonomous, choosing self*." (*my emphasis*)

The embedded neoliberal presupposition of the entrepreneurial self, then, is performative; it produces individuals as certain kinds of citizen-subjects, with certain 'natural' capacities (perhaps "resilience" is one), 'free' but only to the extent they practice their autonomisation and responsibilisation by operating in relation to pre-set governmental imperatives. This is what Foucault (1982), I believe, indicated as the 'power' of power; "power, that is to say, works through, not against, subjectivity" (Rose, 1996, pp. 2). The 'power' of discourse is that it produces us as "particular kinds of being" (*ibid,* pp. 22) aligning our capacities, choices, priorities, hopes and desires with governmental objectives "so that people, following their own self-interest, will do as they ought." (Scott, 1995, pp. 202).

Additionally, legitimating the implicit imperative for students to adopt/develop entrepreneurial qualities and practices of the self, I believe, were beliefs circulating widely in *Brook College* – and society – regarding the so-called competitiveness of HE and graduate employment. Stronach, *et al.*'s

(2014, pp. 320) deconstruction of the metaphors of the 'Credit Crunch' provocatively poses the question: "how are we 'educated' by such discourses?".

Students were often painted a somewhat Darwinian, 'dog eat dog' picture of HE admissions and especially the graduate employment market, where fierce competition reigned, where 'selling' oneself and "standing out" are essential, and where only the 'fittest' would survive and thrive. Students, in different ways, *learned* that HE admissions *is* highly competitive because there would be many students across the country vying for limited places on the most highly-valued courses – such as Law, Architecture, Accountancy, Engineering, Medicine, Veterinary Science – at the 'best' institutions. And, it is worth briefly highlighting the fact these courses all feed into high-status and financially lucrative professions. Plainly stated, these courses are highly desired, I believe, because they are perceived to 'pay off' the investment one makes in them through higher earning potentials perhaps underlining the prevalence of a 'value for money' (Frankham, 2016, pp. 27; Frankham, 2017, pp. 11) priority evident in contemporary students. Indeed, the Guardian (16/8/19) recently reported a decline in the number of students undertaking English at A-Level because many now fail to see its 'value' in this respect. This situation dovetails with an increasing governmental focus on driving students towards STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths) seen as "the holy grail of 21st century education in England." The reason behind 'steering' students towards STEM subjects at A-Level, and subsequently at university, is obviously guided by the governmental goal of global economic competitiveness through industrial, scientific and technological innovation in the knowledge economy.

As described in the analysis of "vision", too, adults routinely told students 'stories' about the highly competitive employment market they would enter following university and how today's graduates were, in so many words, failing to meet the needs of employers/industry. Framing these fields as highly competitive, and characterising graduates as insufficiently employable, are exactly the kinds of responsibilising discourses that displace socio-economic problems onto individuals and engender

forms of (performative) insecurity and self-doubt, even anxiety, leading people to more explicitly reflect on their competitiveness and more consciously work to add or maximise their 'value' (*see also*, Stronach, *et al*., 2014, pp. 323). Indeed, I maintain these are precisely the productive effects of these discourses; this is how we are *all* 'educated' by them. By reinforcing these kinds of 'stories', students soon realise they must secure themselves *for themselves*. They also appreciate that there will always be more they could and should be doing to continuously produce their enduring competitiveness and success/es. As Keddie (2016, pp. 119) puts it:

> "While such discourses also produce anxiety, self-doubt and dissatisfaction […] these students [*better*] 'fit into the coordinates of neoliberal performativity' because they 'militate against complacency, revere competitiveness, tolerate precarity and evince flexibility' (Wilkins, 2012a, p. 207)."

Keddie (*ibid,* pp. 109) refers to this as the supposed 'empowerment' of responsibilising neoliberal constructions of the "'triumphant self'".

It is important to locate all this in our current political landscape. Referring to the rhetoric of the 'Credit Crunch', Stronach, *et al*. (2014, pp. 323) suggest: "…the financial and capitalist nature of the crisis has been displaced elsewhere…". The tremors of the recession and subsequent austerity measures felt in all areas of society, but perhaps especially in the employment market, have lent added credence to the need to make oneself (*more*) competitive to secure opportunity and success when little abounds. It is clear the 'causes' have been "displaced" and "…'dumped' into the privatised worlds of individual victims and translated as realities one confronts individually and struggles with through individual efforts" (Bauman, 1993, pp. 202). The "collectively produced dangers" Bauman (*ibid*) argues, become the individualised concerns and responsibilities of people to "militate against", "tolerate" and even learn to love and "revere"; a kind of performative Stockholm Syndrome if you will.

And, while it remains to be seen, I anticipate the uncertainty of 'Brexit' will produce its own ramifying effects compounding a variety of existing problems and engendering 'new', unforeseen

ones. These are the uncertain times in which we now all must live; "A new wildness is born."

(Stronach, *et al*., 2014, pp. 323).

Barnett (2004, pp. 248) explores what '*Learning for an unknown future*' might entail given that our postmodern world is so often characterised as an "age of 'fragility' (Stehr, 2001)" and uncertainty. Barnett argues this poses a "curricular and pedagogical challenge" (*ibid,* pp. 252) and suggests we try to understand:

> "...terms such as 'fragility', 'uncertainty' and 'instability' are as much *ontological* terms as they are epistemological terms. Accordingly, *this learning for uncertainty is here a matter of learning to live with uncertainty*. It is a form of learning that sets out not to dissolve anxiety – for it recognises that that is not feasible – but that sets out to provide the human wherewithal to live with anxiety."

This, to me, brings the focus sharply back onto the idea of "resilience" and 'ontologic insecurity'. Resilience, "*nowadays*" (*ibid*, pp. 248), is assumed to be an innate human capacity and essential skill all have and need to practice be able to cope and "live with anxiety", instability and uncertainty – *even come to 'love' it* – which appear to be the dominant narratives of our time. These terms are "ontological", they are the characteristics defining the very nature of our (present) reality and the kinds of beings it is possible to be.

However, before more specifically moving onto "resilience", it is worth asking: how accurate are those 'stories' students are told about competition in HE? Is HE a sellers' or buyers' market today?

8.1.3. A "buyers' market": *Calling 'bullshit' on HE competition*

In August 2019, just ahead of A-Level results day, The Guardian published an article proclaiming "UK universities brace for last minute fight for A-Level Students" (10/8/19). The article suggested that the 2018-19 intake year would be "the most competitive" to date – but, for universities. For students, on

the other hand, it said, HE is now more of "a buyers' market". Another Guardian article (13/8/19) regarding the rising number of students entering UCAS' Clearing service sensationally reported that Cambridge "for the first time" had listed open courses at reduced entry requirements marking an unprecedented move for one of the world's 'most prestigious' institutions who have historically been assumed to have their pick of the brightest and best worldwide. Other articles (3/5/19 & 16/4/19) highlighted the "outrageous" rise in unconditional offers to 34% of all UCAS applicants in the previous years' cohort. One columnist (16/4/19) plainly stated:

> "…let's get real. The simple reason for the [*rise in unconditional*] offers is that there aren't as many 18 year olds as in other cohorts, and with the cap on the number of places they offer removed, many universities have spent a fortune on building massive new residential halls and expanding their courses. They need as many warm bodies as possible…"

Summarising her disdain at "unscrupulous" universities who only recently complained about A-Levels and the difficulty selecting between "zillions of A grades" yet students' general unpreparedness for HE study, *but who are now* making record unconditional offers to 'fill seats' and mitigate institutional spending, she said: "…we can all laugh knowing those voices are in the key of hypocrisy singing verses of *bullshit*." (*my emphasis*)

Horsthemke (2014) offers an educational analysis of "bullshit" and "mindfucking". He suggests that what these terms share with lying is that all involve "some sort of abuse of the truth" (pp. 36; McGinn, 2008, pp. xi) noting that "both the liar and the bullshitter are concerned with beliefs – with what their recipients think." (Horsthemke, 2014, pp. 38). He says:

> "The mindfucker, unlike the liar and the bullshitter, cares not only about manipulating the recipient's beliefs […] but also about manipulating the recipient's emotions. […] The mindfucker seeks to evoke emotions of alarm, confusion, insecurity, fear […] At the very least, mindfucking is using emotion to manipulate thought." (*ibid*)

Horsthemke argues that "bullshit" and "mindfucking" lie closer to "indoctrination" and "brainwashing" (*ibid*). Though, "[i]n brainwashing […] the idea is to produce a virtual *tabula rasa* or 'blank slate', which is meant to furnish the docile basis for inculcation and unquestioning acceptance of the desired/'desirable' beliefs." (pp. 39, *emphasis in original*). Importantly, in brainwashing and indoctrination as opposed to lying and mindfucking, the agent necessarily "shares the beliefs" they intend on transmitting. Reflecting on the educational significance of these ideas (pp. 40-42), he suggests that the process of '(re)treating the truth', so to speak, proceeds via three practices, two of which are relevant here: "fragmentation" (IN: McNeil, 1986, pp. 167) – where a topic is reduced to disjointed, decontextualized fragments of information – and "omission" which is "frequently accompanied by a more or less specific reference to students' ignorance or lack of maturity…" in being able to understand something.

I believe these ideas can be usefully applied to reflecting on the 'stories' students are told about competition in admissions and graduate recruitment, what they are told is the absolute need to make themselves competitive and its potential effects. For instance, we saw in the analysis of personal statements how adults assumed students lacked "maturity" given their age and inexperience in recruitment supporting pedagogic interventions focusing on skills and self-marketing. What was 'omitted' was that many students did in fact have a good deal of experience in recruitment and application/CV writing, etc. often for part-time jobs, volunteering posts and/or academic placements. Likewise, in the article examined in the analysis of "vision", we saw a 'fragmented' portrayal of the world of graduate employment which 'omitted' the very economic antecedents of the current state of the market. The 'fragmentations' and 'omissions' in that article performed an elision of the 'social' shifting essentially macro-political and economic issues onto individuals reinforcing their responsibilisations to secure *their own* competitive edge. This is assuredly a neoliberal technology of the self – problems engendered at the level of society/nation

come to be addressed to and by individuals themselves. I also argued that this potentially deflected students from firstly, understanding the nature of such 'problems' and their 'place' in them, and secondly, more worryingly, could prevent them from addressing those 'problems' individually and collectively at the macro level (*see* Burman, 2018). This is because, as a key trait of neoliberalism, each and all are led to believe that the only 'thing' we, as individuals, can meaningfully change is ourselves, leaving problematic systemic-structural elements unchecked. Bauman (1993, pp. 294) may refer to this as the "stratagem of 'close focusing'" where "a 'problem' […] is first cut out from the tangle of its multiple connections with other realities, while the realities with which it is connected are left out of account and melt into the indifferent backdrop of 'action'."

Following Horsthemke (2014), we can perhaps see how these 'stories' could, entirely unmaliciously, act on students' "emotions" engendering feelings of "alarm, confusion, insecurity [*and*] fear" manifesting in 'ontologic insecurity' (Ball, 2003, pp. 220) – perhaps even leading to *actual* mental health issues. Of course, it should be well noted that the adults in *Brook College* very much believe the partial, 'fragmented' stories they tell their students; they 'share' these beliefs both in the sense of transmitting and believing them. This is unquestionable because they are part of the same milieu, the same contextual environment/s and positioned by the same dominant discourses as their students.

However, evident just from the selection of Guardian articles cited above, the HE admissions market is not the same as it was, even recently. Following the governments' removal of caps on the number of places universities could offer, and the introduction of £9,000 fees which has led many students to become more discerning 'consumers' more explicitly considering 'value for money' (Frankham, 2016, pp. 27; Frankham, 2017, pp. 11), it seems the locus of competition has shifted somewhat. Universities are the ones who need to ensure their competitiveness now more so than students.

Coffield's (2002, pp. 42) suggestion in his critique of "lifelong learning" discourses, then, seems very apt indeed:

> "…in the voluminous literature which now exists on the skills young people will need for the future, one essential ingredient tends to be omitted. To put the point somewhat crudely, what young people need most is the ability to detect 'bullshit'."

What, then, should we make of the 'stories' students regularly hear in *Brook College* regarding competition and the need to "stand out"? Is there really such a need if all universities nowadays, to greater or lesser extents, simply need "warm bodies" to fill lecture halls and recoup funds? Given the fact there are fewer students entering HE today and will be fewer graduates entering the employment market in coming years, will graduate recruitment really be as fiercely competitive as they say? A simplistic answer is, no(t really). Yet, these *are* the prevailing discourses and narratives which position "each and all" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 788) (students, teachers, mentors, parents, admissions tutors, HE representatives, etc.) and reinforce this "bullshit" serving to effectively brainwash us all.

A simple analysis would show that this is not necessarily to do with generational fluctuations in HE. At any rate, it isn't set to last long. Larger cohorts follow close behind their contemporaries and look set to 'plug the gap' and return things to 'normal' as it were (The Guardian, 16/4/19). Rather, it is something more profound that transcends these local, temporal concerns. Competition, and competitiveness, are essential ethical components of neoliberalism and central market forces. But unlike the plasticity of markets, their guiding neoliberal logics and imperatives are increasingly ossified. The imperative to improve, enhance and make oneself competitive to secure advantage are so deeply embedded in everyday neoliberal life, reinforced by powerful discourses which have and will continue to structure and condition every aspect of our lives.

Aside any temporary fluctuations in the HE or employment markets, it is more important to understand that neoliberalism constantly and systematically produces specific subjects who "'fit into

the coordinates of neoliberal performativity'", in that they are imbued with specific 'natural' capacities, priorities and desires – such a competition and competitiveness. To use an expression from Shore & Wright (2000, pp. 78): "The logic […] is to produce not 'docile bodies' but 'self-actualised' […] individuals" who desire, and are capable of, securing themselves *for themselves*.

8.1.4. Resilience as "embedded neoliberalism" *(Joseph, 2013)*

In this section, I reflect on my analysis of "resilience". I take off primarily from the work of Joseph (2013) and argue the concept of "resilience" and its associated practices be understood as a form of performative governmentality emerging from "its fit with neoliberal discourse[s]" (pp. 38) deployed "to justify particular forms of governance" (pp. 40).

I believe it is possible to see these kinds of ideas and effects in the conceptualisations and practices of "resilience" at *Brook College.* For instance, in the technology of "self-review" what students are encouraged to do is become self-aware self-managers and responsive to externally defined performative requirements and imperatives. Joseph (*ibid*, pp. 39) argues: "…in order to survive the uncertainties of complex systems, people have to show their own initiative as active and reflexive agents capable of adaptive behaviour". Given that, now, we are in the midst of "a new wildness" (Stronach, *et al.*, 2014, pp. 323), we can see how "initiative", 'reflexivity' and "adaptive behaviour" have become essentialised practices of the self for the positive and active management of risk and uncertainty (Beck, 1992) in entrepreneurial ways. We can locate the technology of "self-review" and formative "SMART" target setting as procedurally impelling students to become such "active and reflexive agents", "show […] initiative" and "survive […] uncertainties". The discursive (re)construction of 'learning as doing' supports students' autonomisation and activation in this respect.

Joseph (*ibid*, pp. 40) remarks: "Resilience fits with a social ontology that urges us to turn away from a concern with the outside world to a concern with our own subjectivity, our adaptability, our reflexive understanding, our own risk assessments, our knowledge acquisition, and above all else, our responsible decision making". These internalised effects are certainly evident in the 'stories' students are told, highlighted above, as well as in the individualising and responsibilising effects of "vision" and "character". Allen's (2012, pp. 15) analysis of meritocracy suggests: "[o]nce doggedly mechanical, the cultivation of populations has now receded into the mind, where it can focus on the individual's interiority". This view positions individuals as preceding the social and constructs the world as beyond us, and our control, facilitating the belief that the only 'thing' that we can control to better cope with the uncontrollable, is oneself.

Paradoxically, but by no means accidentally, the supposed empowerment of "resilience" – as self-control or – discipline and the successes of the "'triumphant self'" (Keddie, 2016, pp. 109) – signals the diminished position of power in those to whom it is addressed. Changes to linear A-Levels, and corresponding changes to pedagogy and study patterns, are examples of 'things' beyond the control of students (and incidentally, teachers, mentors, etc.) but nonetheless for which the appropriate responses are encouraging students to act on themselves in prescribed ways. This helps us locate the notion of resilience within 'new' neoliberal discursive articulations and associated technologies that highlight just how deeply entrenched and naturalised 'entrepreneurialism', discourses of lifelong learning and performative principles have become in educational thought and practice.

Reorienting "vision" onto students themselves, their attitudes, characteristics, learning behaviours, hopes and dreams, *their deficits*, collapsed to the "perpetual educational present" (Allen, 2012a, pp. 13), for example, helps us understand how resilience "play[s] a role in constructing governable

spaces" (Joseph, 2013, pp. 41) and 'subjects'. Zebrowski (2013, pp. 166) quotes Hollings (1973, pp. 21) thoughts on "[a] management approach based on resilience", who states:

> "*Flowing from this would be not the presumption of sufficient knowledge, but the recognition of our ignorance; not the assumption that future events are expected, but that they will be unexpected*. The resilience framework can accommodate this shift in perspective, for it does not require a precise capacity to predict the future, but only a qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they may take." (*my emphasis*)

"[R]ecognition of ignorance" is the same as an awareness of ones' deficits which, as shown, was the undergirding logic of "self-review" procedures; and latterly, a collapsed focus on the "perpetual educational present" is the analogue of a system that does not itself require "a precise capacity to predict the future" but merely induces in individuals a capacity to "absorb and accommodate"; that is, be resilient. And, connecting to the notion of '(ontologic) *in*security', Zebrowski (2013, pp. 169-170) also comments:

> "Security could thus no longer attempt to protect the subject from threat if this meant closing them off from their milieu. Instead, *security would have to proceed by exposing the subject more fully to their environment so as to optimise its governmental effects in encouraging innovation and, crucially, adaptation*." (*my emphasis*)

From a governmentality perspective, Dean (1999, pp. 29) suggests we ask "…how different agents are assembled with specific powers [*or not*], and how different domains are constituted as governable…". In the analysis of resilience, I used the expression 'the portmanteau of resilience' – an idea taken, in part, from Coffield (2002). The reason for this is because resilience seemed to me like a 'catch-all' concept that appeared to function as a floating signifier, or category, leading Coffield (*ibid*, pp. 41) to suggest that in the absence of "context" it is "virtually meaningless". But, this is precisely resilience's power; its polysemy and absorptive capacity. It is a highly expansive, plastic discursive category that provides a general problematising framework of students' able to 'absorb' a

diverse range of issues such as entitlement, complacency, passivity, dependence, vulnerability to

mental health issues, etc. under its discursive ambit and, thus, legitimises a diverse range of logical

interventions. In this way, the problematic of resilience characterises the 'reality' of education (and

of students, teachers, mentors, etc.) in rather specific and diffuse ways to produce students with

"particular capacities" (Murray-Li, 2007, pp. 276) or more accurately, lack thereof, to render their

'common sense' amenability to pedagogic intervention.

Chandler & Reid (2016) interestingly suggest that the very 'power' of neoliberal discourses lies in

their capacity *for* responsive adaptation and transformation; an "expression of the resilience of

neoliberalism" (pp. 56). They argue the neoliberal doctrine, now, has moved away from its classical

moorings in notions of 'security' and positioned its 'new' discursive foundations in the idea of

resilience. They (*ibid*) note that:

> "When neoliberalists preach of the necessity of peoples becoming resilient they are,
> in effect, *arguing for the entrepreneurial practices of self and subjectivity which
> Duffield (2008) calls 'self-reliance'*. Resilient populations do not look to states or
> other entities to secure and improve their well-being because they have been
> disciplined into believing in the necessity to secure and improve it for themselves…"
> (*my emphasis*)

Chandler & Reid's "self-reliance", I feel, connects with my own interpretations of resilience in *Brook

College* as 'self-discipline'. The attributes, traits, behaviours and self-practices forming the concept of

resilience, I think, largely map onto characteristics of the responsibilised entrepreneurial self such as

the capacity for positive change (improvement), flexibility and adaptability. And, these

characteristics connect with discursive imperatives in graduate employability initiatives especially in

the context of the emerging 'precariat' (Standing, 2011) – a new generational 'class' now, more than

any before, required to live with, tolerate and overcome instability and uncertainty, but without

possibility or power to address and change those conditions. The rhetoric of (graduate)

employability stresses individuals' responsibility to constantly adapt, improve and enhance

themselves through investment in skills acquisition (preferably 'transferrable' ones (Bridges, 1993)),

re-training or re-specialising by undertaking further education, like HE and postgraduate qualifications for example. In this sense, to me, the 'need' for students to constantly work to produce their own employability in neoliberalism, as a function of their 'success', is a matter of *marketplace resilience*.

8.1.5. Resilience and (the commodification of) mental health

At this point, I feel, it is worth focusing on resilience in a little more detail and particularly in relation to recent (and less recent) reports regarding sharply rising mental health issues among contemporary students which, as indicated in the analysis of resilience in the A-level Mindset, formed one of its central legitimising problematics.

As described, I felt *Brook College* exhibited an intense 'culture of success' engendered by exceedingly high expectations and gently reinforced based on rising student achievement figures year on year – something which affects staff as much as students. Though, I felt aspects of this 'culture' connected, or pointed to, potentially psychologically damaging conditions and effects for/in students in particular, such as perfectionism, a 'fear of failure' and, what may be construed as, a somewhat punitive system of "progression and consultation" based on the achievement of minimum target grades (MTGs) required to progress to the next part of their A-level studies. So too, for instance, the pressures students face to achieve highly in A-Level exams in order to be/make themselves competitive, and successful, in their HE applications caused for some a great deal of stress and anxiety. Additionally, the exceedingly high threshold that appeared to define success and being a 'superstar' in *Brook* combined with the institutional process of "progression and consultation" meant that many students developed self-confidence and self-esteem issues through failing to meet targets, competitive comparison with other students and the social stigma of (being a) 'failure'. The story of Maria (*and a host of others I encountered but have not mentioned*) comes to mind here. Likewise, the kind of 'ontologic insecurity' (Ball, 2003, pp. 220) I felt resulted from the

range of "self-review" procedures students were required to complete, only seemed to force students to question themselves more, and more critically, and seemed to exacerbate feelings of (performative) anxiety and stress among some students already under similar pressures.

This, to me, is where the resilience enters the frame again. I believe that the primary 'causes' of the rise in student mental health issues have been largely driven by the latent effects of marketisation, commodification and the intensification of performative cultures in the UK – both at the third level, evident in *Brook College*, and in the HE sector (*see* Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Natale & Doran, 2012; Boden & Epstein, 2006; Lynch, 2006; Potts, 2005; Ritzer, 1998). A Guardian article from 2017 (23/5/17) cited a report from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) that claimed a staggering 210% increase in students citing serious mental health issues at university between 2009/10 and 2014/15. The article suggested that today's "young people were under greater pressure to succeed" than any previous cohort. Catherine McAteer, a member of University College London's student services team, said that "…the pressure for them today means many think anything less than a first is a failure." Tomlinson's (2006) study would appear to corroborate this anecdotal observation. And, we can see this in *Brook College* when the exceedingly high achieving "superstars" are held us as 'models' such that many students begin to believe that "anything less" than highest levels of achievement renders them as a "failure" by comparison.

Another article (13/4/16) drew a more direct connection between rising mental health problems and the processes of commodification and marketisation alongside recent increases to tuition fees. In that article the then Vice President of the National Union of Students (NUS) said: "The evidence is clear. The marketisation of education is having a huge impact on students' mental health." The article suggested that the "unprecedented financial burden" students today face results in acute financial anxieties, sometimes leading to clinically diagnosable mental illness such as depression (Andrews & Wilding, 2004), compounded further by the fact that "[t]he value of education has moved away from societal value to 'value for money' and the emphasis on students competing

against each other is causing isolation, stress and anxiety." Again, the Guardian's report (16/8/19) regarding declining numbers of students choosing to study English at A-Level and related Arts and Humanities programmes in HE suggested this was driven by ruthless 'value for money' considerations, now seemingly especially important to students in our post-recession climate of austerity. In that article, a deputy head teacher was quoted as saying: "The rhetoric is that English is indulgent and arty *but not something that can support you financially*, in comparison to a subject like maths or economics." Frankham's (2015; 2016) work seems to show how the 'value for money' discourse has been exacerbated, at least in part, by the performative audit technologies of the NSS and TEF that now seem to play out and condition many students' thinking about and engagement in HE, as well as their identities as 'consumers'.

Importantly, the NUS representative quoted above suggested that, given the forces of marketization and the need for universities to "compete aggressively" for students that "more money [*goes*] into advertising initiatives than student support services." It would seem more money, resources, effort and attention are being paid to attracting and recruiting new students, as opposed to caring and developing appropriate pastoral and healthcare provisions for those students already enrolled and experiencing difficulties. While it appears that student mental health and wellbeing are now more explicitly 'on the agenda' as items of consideration for universities, paradoxically, some reports indicate that lower numbers of enrolling students and tightening budgets have meant that many student support services, such as counselling, have either been radically downsized, cut (The Guardian, 23/5/17) or now face significantly increased waiting times to access (The Guardian, 16/9/19). Cynically, we could argue that this because counselling services and staff are rather expensive; telling people they need to be more 'resilient', and supporting them to manage issues on their own through individualised pedagogical and/or psychological strategies, on the other hand, is perhaps not as expensive.

Of course, on-campus counselling and support services have been an enduring fixture of universities for some time now (Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson, 2005). It would seem universities are *now* working to devote much more effort and resources to the development of such student-focused resources, initiatives and systems to address rising student mental health and wellbeing problems while at university – yet reports indicate that the sharp rise in student mental health issues have added "pressure" (OfS, 2019) to already pressurised staff and institutional provisions. For instance, Cambridge University, in 2017, published research (Galante, *et al.,* 2017) on "mindfulness" as an "intervention to increase resilience to [*academic*] stress" during exam periods – and this appears to be a rather common psycho-pedagogical move across institutions in the sector. My own university, LJMU, is no exception and has a range of student focused support systems in place to equip students with the 'strategies' and psychological wherewithal to deal with issues themselves.

Additionally, many universities are now implementing wholesale changes to their current practices and provisions as a result of adopting specific frameworks and 'best practice' guidance from HE support organisations – such as the 'Step Change' framework produced by Universities UK that seeks to ensure student mental health and wellbeing are priority concerns embedded in all aspects of an institution, the new Office for Students 'Challenge Competition' (OfS, 2019) funding 10 projects to address mental health "outcomes" (pp. 3) for students, and the instigation of more formal partnerships with the NHS at local and national levels. A range of other organisations are also working in this area producing extensive reports, statistics and research findings with a view to informing institutional governance, such as the HEPI, HESA, WonkHE (2019), IPPR (2017) and the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011) to name only a few.

Importantly though, despite all this, psychological (di)stress, to me, is not something which should be associated with education or learning in general terms. However, I feel the performative, neoliberal ethical imperative for 'success-at-all-costs' achieved through rigorous responsibilisations

for self-work has in part resulted in and contextually normalised a certain degree of academic (di)stress, anxiety and other worrying psychological effects. For instance, the discourse of "effort" in the A-Level Mindset – simply defined as doing more and more and more – could be read as normalising potentially unhealthy and destructive learning behaviours and study patterns. It is also more simply an absurd equivalency and false economy; that is, more does not always and invariably mean *better*. As an example of how 'normalised' such study patterns appear to be becoming as a result of the absolute need for success in achievement, The Guardian recently published an article (30/4/18) where ex-Head of the prestigious private school Harrow suggested in a blog post on the Independent Schools Council website that it was entirely reasonable to insist students "work for seven hours a day", totalling about "100 hours of revision", over the two week Easter break prior to their A-Levels. *Brook College* suggested and encouraged similar patterns of study in presentations to students' parents, and indeed, similar advice is evident in the "CSF" questionnaire and the crude equivalence drawn between hours spent on what types of revision activities and exam success. It is easy to appreciate the pressure, stress and anxiety, not to mention the erosion of school-life balance, ability to relax or simply 'be a kid', such advice from adults (and prestigious 'experts') carries for students at this important transitory time in their lives.

This is because, *to me at least*, not many operating in these fields seem particularly interested in reflecting on what appear, to me at least, to be the obvious causes of rising student mental issues; or if they do, significant gaps and omissions are present. Rather, it would seem the focus and response lies in (the rhetoric of) 'solutions'; particularly, in making students (more) resilient, more equipped to 'cope', more willing to acquiesce and accept than resist and say 'no' to the cultures, systems and structures that may be contributing to poor mental health. The logic and practice of resilience (as 'coping' and self-discipline) forces individuals to locate problems in themselves, in their psychological inner-worlds and in the quality of their responses to the problematic features and effects of neoliberal performativity. In this sense, I believe resilience is a shrewd contemporary neoliberal technology of the self that has gained prominence at just the right time. Though, perhaps,

in the context of the undergirding 'ontologic insecurity' of performativity it would seem reasonable

to wonder if this will not eventually lead to further insecurities and anxieties where the question will

inevitably become: 'am I resilient *enough?'*

I also wish to draw attention to Esposito & Perez's (2014) reflections on the "commodification of

mental health" that I feel are particularly relevant here. They suggest that:

> "…encouraging people to adjust their attitudes, habits, and behaviours to fit market
> demands is typically associated with functional/rational behaviour. Not accepting or failing
> to become fully integrated into this market reality is, at best, regarded as a type of
> irrational/unproductive idealism, or even more typically, *associated with personal deviance*
> *and/or pathology*. As an illustration of the latter possibility, one might consider that
> conditions such as anxiety and depression (among many others) are treated as self-
> contained ailments […] as opposed to being by-products of a market society…" (pp. 416, *my*
> *emphasis*)

These authors suggest that the introduction of market forces into almost every sphere of life,

combined with the 'medicalisation' of psychological wellbeing has succeeded in more firmly

"situating illness *within* the individual" (*my emphasis*) further "pathologiz[*ing*] thoughts and

behaviours that deviate from what the market defines as functional, productive, or desirable." (pp.

414) and commodifying mental health. Perhaps, we can see how the idea of "resilience" achieves

similar effects by positioning 'problems' *in* individuals' interiorities and their outward responses to

the "market reality" (pp. 420), or *realties of* the market. These authors draw a connection with

modern pharmaceuticals that are not necessarily designed to remediate illness but are rather

designed "to enhance the body [*and/or mind*] in such a way that makes one more competitive,

attractive, and/or marketable…" (pp. 430). The supposed "magic pill" (TES, 12/11/17) of resilience, I

argue, could be read in this way. And, of course, *more literally,* there has been a recent sharp rise in

the number of HE students now using so-called 'smart drugs' (Nootropics), such as Modafinil, to

variously help them cope with exam stress and/or give them an academic 'edge' (The Guardian,

10/5/17). One Guardian (1/10/09) article suggested that: "The pressure to succeed academically is

very real, and [*as such*] […] it is likely that all avenues for performance enhancement will be exhausted." Perhaps we could see in this situation some interesting parallels to Saltmarsh's (2004) theorisations of academic plagiarism as a consumptive practice utilised by students to navigate a performative university education in which they are positioned as 'consumers'.

Likewise, a blog post from the Times Education Supplement (TES) also noted how Carol Dweck, developer of 'mindset theories', had received a $4 million global education prize to roll out "real world interpretations" of her work underscoring the educational commodification of today's students' psychological health and wellbeing.

Another article from the TES (6/10/17) posed the question: "Is growth mindset the new learning styles?". The author, here, suggested that mindset and resilience – "like brain gym or learning styles" – may be just another in a long list of educational 'fads' pedalled and 'sold' to schools and educators, framed as *the* 'solution'. A related article, again from the TES (29/1/17), highlighted the neoliberal "obsession with jargon and fads" and cited *just some* of the most recent to colonise educational thought and practice which at one time were thought to be 'the solution':

> "Brain gym. Left and right brains. Multiple intelligences. Learning styles. De Bono's thinking hats. MOOCs (remember those?). Bloom's taxonomy. Energizers. Deep marking. Triple marking. 21st century skills. Dimensions of learning. Discovery learning. Project-based learning. Child-centred learning. Flipped learning. Different colours for different personalities. […] Learning walks. Learning objectives. Learning outcomes. Targets. Non-negotiables. Success criteria. Added value. Plenaries. Cognitive flexibility. Metacognition. Cultivate. Enrich. Empower."

It is important to not forget that, by and large, many of these now defunct 'fads' emerged from academic scholarship that have been simplified and (re)packaged by a range of organisations and private enterprises, and effectively sold to schools as panaceas. It seems *A-Level Mindset* (Oakes & Griffin, 2016) is just one more example of this, which has at least in part, pathologized students' in specific ways and commodified their mental health to sell teacher companion books.

8.1.5.1. Student mental health in "crisis": *the measure of things*

Before drawing this section to a close, I think it is worthwhile to draw attention to a selection of empirical work, policy and practice 'think-pieces', evaluations, appraisals and other assorted reports from a range of organisations and agencies operating in the HE sector that I feel are exemplary in highlighting the common ways in which students and the "crisis" (The Guardian, 15/2/19) of student mental health are currently being understood and discussed. My aim, here, is to cast something of a critical eye over the commonplace means by which students and the topic of student mental health and wellbeing are currently being discursively constructed and discussed such as, the 'problems' identified or supposed (and whose problems they are), the 'causes' or contributing 'factors' cited, ignored or elided, and how these are all framed almost exclusively by hegemonic 'scientific' discourses of data and, in the context of educational policy and practice, the rhetoric of 'what works' and imperative of evidence (based practice).

While undoubtedly the contemporary "crisis" (Macaskill, 2013) of student mental health and wellbeing has become "[a]n issue of growing concern" (Andrews & Wilding, 2004, pp. 509) over recent years, the idea of considering the mental health of students relative to their education and achievement is not at all 'new'. For instance, Andrews & Wilding (*ibid*) cite a range of studies exploring aspects of students' mental health before, during and post-university such as stress and distress, tension, anxiety and depression in relation to a number of diverse academic and pastoral issues, from the 1980s (*see* Fisher & Hood, 1987) and as far back as the 1960s (*see* Kelvin, Lucas & Ojha, 1965; Furneaux, 1962) – showing, at the very least, that this is not necessarily *just* a 'problem' and subject of consideration *today*. However, given that today the issue is routinely referred to as a sector wide "crisis" plaguing HE (and society as a whole), that demand effective and expedient 'solutions', we could argue it has come to increasing prominence in public debate recently. In part at least, the emergence of this "crisis", as I understand it, speaks to the latent or secondary effects resulting from the increasing neoliberalisation and large-scale paradigmatic changes that HE has

experienced through this period. For instance, a report published by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 2011 on student mental health and wellbeing noted that: "Social changes such as the withdrawal of financial support, higher rates of family breakdown and more recently, economic recession are all having an impact on the wellbeing of students and other young people." (pp. 7). The report further states that, now, among students "[f]inancial pressures and academic concerns are consistently identified as important contributors to mental health symptoms" (pp. 32), also cited alongside significant social changes such as increasing "unemployment" (pp. 22) or perhaps, for soon-to-graduate students, the *fear* of unemployment and economic precarity. With respect to HE specifically, we could also add to this list of changes: the relatively large increase in the contemporary student population and moreover, the increased diversity of those students as a result of concerted widening participation and access initiatives targeted at those traditionally "marginalised groups" that have presented HE with a range of "unique challenges" in support (OfS, 2019, pp. 4; *see also* IPPR, 2017); the increasing fragmentation and modularisation of HE curricula leading to disjointed course structures and learning experiences threatening students' relationship building, their sense of 'belonging' and contributing to feelings of isolation (OfS, 2019; Tinklin, Riddell & Wilson, 2005); the increased/ing marketisation, commodification and metricisation of HE leading to a more explicitly and intensely competitive and individualised culture; accompanying decreases in student funding provisions, cost of living 'fears' while at university that mean many now must take part-time jobs by necessity and need to manage these with their studies, and the rising 'fear' of student loan debt following university and (OfS, 2019; Universities UK, 2018); the economic and employment challenges, uncertainty and 'precarity' following university (Standing, 2001); the increasingly individualised 'culture' and remote nature of HE that often leaves students who move away from home to study feeling alienated, isolated or alone (WonkHE, 2019). I could go on enumerating the kinds of changes HE and students have experienced cited in extant literature, however, suffice it to say here that these changes have been relatively quick and quite dramatic – yet few seem to mention the framing neoliberal context of HE and cultures of performativity.

Garland (2017, pp. 2) argues: "'Neoliberalism' and what the term describes, it should be remembered, is never used by its proponents, be they its policy makers or propagandists" because they "take [*sic*] such wisdom as given - implicitly or otherwise - and a straightforward 'realism' toward the existing world and form of society [*as it is*]." As noted, this is the ontological "age of 'fragility'" (Stehr, 2001, in: Barnett, 2004, pp. 248) that characterises the 'common sense', hegemonic "wisdom", "realism" and "inevitability" (Garland, 2017, pp. 1-2) of our times that has an undeniable impact on HE.

My interest here, however, is in the way the "crisis" or problem of student mental health is currently being understood and discussed publicly at governmental and institutional levels. Perhaps unsurprisingly in work routinely used to inform policy and practice decisions and recommendations in this area, the large majority are heavily quantitative or mixed-methods with strongly quantitative designs, often collecting decontextualized and second-order 'proxy' data via rather blunt survey instruments, and analysing this data statistically to offer a dazzling array of numbers and percentages split and disaggregated in a seemingly endless variety of ways along a multitude of student groups and characteristics. Though, for as comprehensive as these reports are, it is worth asking some rather basic and critical questions of them.

Firstly, let me be clear – the 'problem' is not at all clear, as I read it. After having read a number of extensive reports and primary research, what immediately strikes me is the obvious definitional paucity regarding the very terms of the discussion itself. For instance, MacDonald (2006, pp. 12) tries to answer the question *What is mental health?* and suggests that this definitional uncertainty is not surprising, "not least [*for*] the fact that at least 20 competing definitions have been published" by a range of academics, organisations and ministerial bodies. This leads Cameron, Mathers & Parry (2006, pp. 347) to suggest the notion of mental health and wellbeing now function as a single "catch-all category" (perhaps analogous to "resilience"). Likewise, the Higher Education Policy

Institute (HEPI) notes that it now gathers student mental health, welfare and wellbeing data more consistently than ever before given the inclusion of this element, since 2014, in the Student Academic Experience Survey (HEPI, 2019). However, they also note a definitional issue with regards the terms 'mental health' and 'well-being' that is not widely cited in other such reports. They note the terms are "difficult to define precisely" and are often used "interchangeably", going on to suggest that "[c]onflating mental health and well-being can be damaging to individuals and the provision of support services." (pp. 1). Again, MacDonald's (2006, pp. 12) critical questions caption the problematics well, I think:

> "...how does anyone decide between them [*i.e. competing definition*s *of mental health]?* How does anyone decide about which needs, skills, feelings and beliefs are involved in mental health, and hence which ones need promoting? And what is the rationale for this choice? Who of any of us has the right to decide this on behalf of other people? *Whatever answers are given to our questions here, the point to remember is that these definitions are arbitrary and relative to the values and assumptions of those doing the defining*. And these answers are given on behalf of people whose mental health we are concerned about, using language, norms and assumptions that may not be shared by those people. Secker (1998) argues that this goes against what is one of the basic principles of health promotion, namely a respect for diverse cultures and beliefs…" (*my emphasis*)

The new Office for Students (OfS), in their report *Mental Health: Are all students being properly supported?* (2019), on the other hand, takes a different tack and does define the terms 'mental health condition', 'mental ill health' and 'wellbeing' specifically and explicitly. They define "mental health conditions" as "clinically diagnosable", "mental ill health" as "a broader term describing mental distress *that may or may not* be related to a diagnosable mental health condition", and latterly, "wellbeing" as "*broader still*, and relates to people's thoughts and feelings about their own quality of life" (*ibid*, pp. 2, *my emphasis*). While these definitions are internally clear and seem to

include one within the next cascading from more to less specific, none are to my eye, definitive. The

latter of these measures, "wellbeing", the report says is one adapted to HE from the Office for

National Statistics' measures of "national wellbeing" (2011; 2014/15) itself adapted from the work of

"economists who questioned" whether or not there were better ways to "track progress in society"

rather than "Gross Domestic Product" (HEPI, 2019, pp. 1). This alone perhaps illuminates something

of the wider neoliberal frame structuring the discourses about and measures of mental health and

wellbeing in contemporary society.

But, of course, as far as the sector goes these are the routine definitional terms and methodologies

by which data regarding student mental health and well-being are gathered, analysed and

understood. Yet, to me, they appear rather vague and in this sense, can only lead to vague and

uncertain statistics leading onto vague and uncertain interpretations, inferences and conclusions –

though very few appear to be framed in these ways. The OfS (2018) produced a report regarding

their gathering of such mental health and wellbeing data after having devised 4 questions related to

"life satisfaction", "[*life*] worthwhile", "happiness" and "anxiety" that a HEPI (2019) report also

suggested had been developed by "experts" (pp. 7), "modelled on comparable international

measures" (pp. 3) having "stood up to national comparison" (pp. 7). Despite statements made that

these measures have undergone "significant consultation and review" (pp. 3) prior to their

implementation, and that the measures themselves are accompanied by definitional prompts during

completion, I believe a rather obvious problem exists. For instance, is "happiness" *one* 'thing'? And,

if we agree it is, who gets to define this? Who has the right to? Is "happiness" uniformly understood

and experienced by everyone? Is it a fixed state or more transitory, wave-like, coming and going at

different times, in different situations and contexts? Can our understanding of 'happiness' not

change throughout our lives? Can 'happiness' be scored on a scale from 0-10? Should it be? What

should we make of the accompanying question prompt – "Overall, how happy did you feel

yesterday?" Is this question really interrogating deep-seated personal and existential feelings of

contentment and happiness, or simply capturing ones' 'mood' around the moment of questioning? Given the HEPI (2019, pp. 7) note that these questions only take "1 minute 30 seconds" to complete, do we seriously believe they *could* come anywhere close to measuring what they purport to? Philosophers, theologians, artists, writers and many more besides have been exploring the 'human condition' examining ideas of happiness perhaps for as long as humans themselves and, we could argue, have yet to 'capture' their elusive object. It would seem absurd, then, to *believe* that a 4 question Likert survey would be able to 'capture' anything about happiness of any significant empirical worth, at least in the context of policy and practice informing. In fact, on this point, it is perhaps worth asking if we *believe* at all that such things – like 'happiness' – that speak to the 'core' of who we are and how we think ourselves and our lives, are measurable in the first sense, and in the second sense, if they can be measured so easily. I would confidently argue not on both counts. And this, I believe, is a problematic at the root of these discussions that also connects to the increasing metricisation and performativity of HE.

Staying on the idea of 'data' collected on or about student mental health and wellbeing, I believe there are a range of nested problematics to unpack. First, more often than not such data is collected immediately prior to or upon entry to university and given the definitions above, it is only those students who have *both* a formally diagnosed mental health condition *and* subsequently declared it on such surveys, that are currently captured by the stats. So, even when the OfS confidently reports stats and notes that mental health figures among fulltime students who "reported" a "mental health condition" have increased from 1.4% in 2012/13 to 3.5% in 2017/18, they also qualify that this is "almost certainly an underestimate" (2019, pp. 4). There are likely to be a vast number of students who may be experiencing – *for them* – profound mental health problems and disturbances yet either through simply not having sought or obtained formal clinical diagnoses, or if they have, not self-reporting this, are not captured by the stats making them an 'invisible' group among the student population unattended in institutional provision. The Royal College of Psychiatrists report (2011) recommends more primary epidemiological studies are needed to address this 'gap' and the widely

"discrepant" data on prevalence figures we currently possess in order to get a 'true' sense of the scale and nature of the problem. They suggest such studies "…should focus not only on diagnosable mental illnesses but also on psychological distress that may not meet standard diagnostic criteria." (pp. 32). Interestingly, they also note that "…there is also a need for the health service to focus its resources on those who are, in some sense, mentally unwell [*according to current definitions*]. A formal psychiatric diagnosis may therefore be a necessary 'admission ticket'…" (*ibid,* pp. 19) to certain services both in the NHS and at the university level that may point to certain technologies of access and support. However, it is also worth noting that a large proportion of primary empirical studies regarding student mental health are conducted by researchers operating in medical, psychological/psychiatric, and/or public and occupational health fields that, as such, may have a tendency to treat mental health more clinically, as opposed to taking a more socio-cultural perspective (*see* Juniper, 2005 and, Juniper, *et al.*, 2012: who originally studied the health-related quality of life (HQRL) measures in individuals suffering from asthma (2005), and subsequently re-operationalised the same concepts in a study related to "researcher's overall well-being" (2012, pp. 565), deriving definitions of researcher's wellbeing from that previous definitions of patient's wellbeing, and applying an "impact analysis" (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018, pp. 5) methodology used primarily in clinical studies). This perhaps only further contributes to the pathologisation and medicalisation of discursive understandings of students' mental health that compound the problematics of such dominant clinical definitions that render some students 'invisible'.

A number of reports have also noted a prevalent social stigma attached to actually disclosing a student is experiencing a mental health problem in the first place given the perceptions often attached to those suffering with disturbances, even suggesting the reporting process itself "can be stressful" (HEPI, 2019, pp. 6) and may make some, particularly in some minority ethnic groups, less likely to come forward. Some reports have highlighted significant intersectional differences in the likelihood of disclosure and seeking of help among different student populations/groups based on sex/sexual identity, sexuality, ethnicity and socio-economic status, particularly impacting young

Men, Black and other minority ethnic communities, demonstrating profoundly decreased relative likelihoods of self-reporting (HEPI, 2019; IPPR, 2017; Universities UK, 2018; Macaskill, 2013; Tinkin, Riddell & Wilson, 2005). A 2019 Unite study, for example, showed that only 53% of students with a mental health condition actually reported this to their university showing at least, on an optimistic reading, that almost half of those students experiencing mental health issues may be being missed by the current systems that require students to have a diagnostic 'admission ticket' and show an the over-reliance on second-order proxy measures (*see* Universities UK, 2018, pp. 8) and in current support provisions that may be culturally insensitive. Again, I think the issue of self-disclosure is another clear but subtle example of the kinds of responsibilisations imposed on students where, here, the onus is firmly on *them* to make themselves known. We could wonder if there are not better, more institutionally sensitive and dispersed ways of formalising and discharging duty of care responsibilities among institutions and their staff to help identify early warning signs in their students and, at least in part, relieve the stressful burden of having to self-report/disclose. However, this too has its own problems as many staff, through the intensification of their workloads and fundamental changes to the nature of teaching and relationships with students, simply may not have the time or level of personal contact to be able to achieve this successfully in practice. At the level of the institution, for instance, Tinkin, Riddell & Wilson (2005) also note among their case studies, students' perceptions of institutional systems for reporting mental health issues, seeking help and applying for 'extenuating circumstances' or engaging in 'fitness to study' evaluations to suspend their studies, as inflexible, unfair and themselves stigmatised – with some students even noting how they felt they were not taken 'seriously', in a manner of speaking.

Of course, from the Disability Discrimination Act of 2002 to the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010, universities have a legal obligation to make any and all reasonable adjustments and provisions to permit equality of access to disabled students – of which students with pre-existing mental health conditions are considered a sub-group. Again, the notion of 'pre-existing' is problematic. While students' rights and university's responsibilities are now enshrined in law, Tinkin, Riddell & Wilson

(2005) highlight that many of those students experiencing mental health issues – even if these *are*

formally diagnosed prior to enrolment – do not identify or recognise themselves as 'disabled' in a

normative or conventional sense as policy frameworks define it: "The students with mental health

difficulties that we spoke to during the course of our research did not particularly identify

themselves as 'disabled'…" (pp. 496). So, we can begin to see just how problematic the current data

and collection procedures are for 'capturing' those affected students when entering and while at

university truly are, and can perhaps appreciate the size of the potential 'gaps' that may exist in our

knowledge of the problem. It is important to recognise in this data-heavy, evidence-based practice

context, that not having data means not being able to 'respond'. This is perhaps what animates the

OfS (2019) to suggest that the current 'gaps' in knowledge and practice mean students, and

especially those students in already "marginalised groups" (pp. 4), are continually "being failed" (pp.

5). However, the answer to this problem again would seem to be 'more data'.

Correspondingly, we could also argue that the HE sector as whole has already reached a critical

capacity with measures, metrics and rubrics, and for universities, with the supposedly unproblematic

instrumentality of the 'products' of these statistical reports. Firstly, given the critical reading above,

the data regarding mental health universities gather or are supposed to have access to may be so

full of holes that developing adequate provisions that are also appropriately culturally and ethnically

sensitive based on them, is naively hopeful at best. Secondly, we can take issue with the increasing

drive towards the wholesale data-ification of HE itself that now extends even deeper to its smallest

component parts; even as far down as students' psycho-emotional interiorities. The fundamental

assumption, here, and in a range of other reports, is epistemologic and methodologic; it is the

assumption that scientifically, quantitatively generated and analysed, numeric data is the best (and,

only) way to understand and address such sector wide problems – "…universities can only

understand the demand for mental health and wellbeing services *if they have the data*…"; "…if we

want to have better conversations [*about mental health and wellbeing*] […] we need the data to

support this." (HEPI, 2019, pp. 2; 7, *my emphasis*). Perhaps, in this specific instance, we have the blending of discourses and practices of measurement as they relate to HE on the one hand, and as they relate to the medical domain of mental health on the other – both of which valorise quantitative measures. Indeed, it could be argued that the HE sector (like many governmental areas) have learned valuable lessons from the medical (research) domain by adopting their conventional RCT (Randomised Controlled Trials) and experimental methodologies that rely on large-scale statistical analyses for generalisability acting on vexing complexity and individual differences.

Additionally, this need for and belief in the explanatory power of data and evidence is reinforced by the fact that the HEPI (*ibid*) document I have been citing thus far does not specifically concern itself student mental health and wellbeing *as such*, but with how we should go about measuring it and how we ought be using that data to inform policy and practice decisions. Likewise, the OfS document I have been citing puts equally great stock into data and evidence, belied by the general tone of the piece and marked clearly by one of its sub-headings, "What the data tells us…" (OfS, 2019, pp. 4). It is no surprise, then, that the first chapter of the Government's green paper, *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision* (2017), begins as you'd expect by constructing the problem space through recourse to data and linking this to "action", entitled: "Case for action: *the evidence*" (pp. 1; 6-11). The assumption here, and across a range of similar documents, is that scientific, numeric data 'speaks' to us and 'informs' us in some obvious and unproblematic way as to how we should think a problem and proceed on this basis; I maintain, in most cases, it does not. But, of course, this *is* the logic providing the rationale for discourses of 'evidence-based practice' now the norm in contemporary educational policy and practice framed by performative cultures of audit and new managerialist systems and practices focusing on 'what works' (Biesta, 2007; Hammersely, 2005; Davies, 2003; Hargreaves, 1996, 1999).

And, thirdly, there is a tendency amid these statistics, in the context of how successfully institutions are able to support students with (disclosed) mental health problems, to focus on "action"

particularly in the context of 'outcomes'– both in the short term, relative to continuation and

completion of degrees, and in the "longer term […] personal, social and *economic* consequences."

(Universities UK, 2018, pp. 1) – while showing relatively little interest in 'causes'. This to me shows

how the discourses of student wellbeing and mental health are unavoidably caught up in the

neoliberal system in which it exists, and that I maintain is one of its core antecedents. By deflecting

attention from 'causes' onto 'outcomes' the contextual environment recedes from view. Happiness,

wellbeing and positive mental health, here, are seen as 'outcomes', *products* of one's investment in

a university education. And, importantly, these are still understood as functions of or contributing to

a successful neoliberal life, one that frames happiness, etc. in terms of "longer term… economic"

'outcomes' and imperatives above all else. Hall (2010, pp. 323-324) recognises the definitional issue I

have raised, and cites an operational definition of mental health for her study, taken from the World

Health Organisation (2005), that I think exemplifies this neoliberal framing:

> "Mental health and wellbeing are fundamental to the quality of life and productivity
> of individuals, families, communities and nations, enabling people to experience life
> as meaningful and to be creative and active citizens. We believe that the primary
> aim of mental health activity is to enhance people's wellbeing and functioning by
> focusing on their strengths and resources, reinforcing resilience and enhancing
> protective external factors."

We should note particularly the language used here, and how it is conjoined: "quality of life *and*

productivity", "to be creative *and* active citizens", "enhance people's wellbeing *and* functioning",

"reinforcing resilience *and* enhancing protective external factors". Given the analysis thus far, we

can easily appreciate how this definition is constructed in close relation to the operant categories

and imperatives of neoliberalism by conflating things like 'quality of life' or 'wellbeing' with

'productivity' and 'functioning', stressing personal and individualised, as well as social, responses

and responsibilities like 'resilience' and 'active citizenship' which, on this framing, 'enables' people to

experience life as 'meaningful'.

Lastly, in the context of a heavily neoliberalised, intensely performative, metricised, marketized and commodified sector, there is the likelihood that the contemporary proliferation of mental health and wellbeing statistics (flawed and partial as they are) will soon simply become another part of yet another league table, setting one institution against another in terms of who best ensures the psychological wellbeing of their students, or who makes them the 'happiest'. Of course, these are valid concerns with respect to HE however, I suspect this would be a dangerous road to take. To my mind, we would be truly 'through the looking glass' should 'happiness' metrics become the norm; though, perhaps we are already further down this road than we might like to think given the National Student Survey (NSS) is now a permanent fixture in HE and focuses, in large part, on HE 'quality' and student (dis)*satisfaction* (*see* Nixon, Scullion & Hearn, 2016; Douglas, *et al.,* 2015*;* Frankham, 2015; Gibbons, Neumayer & Perkins, 2015; Alter & Reback, 2014; Dean, 2011*;* Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011; Douglas, McClelland & Davies, 2008; Douglas & Douglas, 2006). The HEPI (2019) report even notes this very concern, however, argues: "…this is a common refrain when talking about new data collection – and a legitimate one. However, *if we avoided collecting all data because it might feed new league tables and unfavourable headlines, we would end up with no evidence basis for policy making*." (pp. 6, *my emphasis*). Again, the absolute imperative for data and 'evidence' to inform and base policy and practice decisions can easily explain away any problematics raised against it because it is deeply circular and autotelic; so much so that the response will always be essentially 'more of the same', because *how else would we do it?*

And, to be sure, these issues are not the sole preserve of HE students and institutions. The Universities UK (2018, pp. 9) report *Minding our Future* reports that the "Princes Trust has indicated that young people have the lowest levels of happiness and confidence in their emotional health since reporting started in 2009" and highlights that incidences of mood, anxiety, personality, psychotic, eating and substance misuse disorders in young people, that peak in early childhood and

adolescence where "50% of mental health problems are established by age 14" and "75% by 24" – covering the most significant period of their educational lives. So, we can see that mental health issues appear to emerge right at a time when students' studies are becoming more serious and high-stakes relative to their futures, coming at a time when they are making the transition into GCSEs and at least beginning to consider university following their A-Levels; and further peak, around the time they are completing their degrees. Macaskill's (2013, pp. 435) study of the impact of widening participation and access initiatives, highlights that while 1st and 2nd year undergraduate students are "known to be at high risk for the onset of mental health problems (Kessler et al., 2007)" that "the transition to university co-occurring with the transition to adulthood is an additional risk factor" citing a range of corroborating sources (*see* Montgomery & Côte, 2003; Gall, *et al.*, 2000; Chemers, *et al.*, 2001; Bryde & Milburn, 1990) that suggest such mental health issues pre-exist the school to university transition.

So, while it seems that the issue of student mental health and wellbeing has reached the level of "crisis" in public discourse with respect of HE and HE students, it would appear that the 'problems' emerge long before students reach this stage, and are sustained and/or exacerbated during transitions, upon entry and continue thereafter. Some studies have noted the need now for primary (Hall, 2010) and secondary schools and their staff (Shelemy, Harvey & Waite, 2019) to be more aware of and trained in the identification of at students 'at risk' or already experiencing mental health disturbances and clinically diagnosed conditions, and how to appropriately deal with these at the level of the classroom as this connects with whole school and nationwide initiatives and approaches. Roeser & Midgley's (1997) survey of teachers showed how *99%* considered acknowledging and managing their students' mental health needs to be a fundamental part of what they considered their 'teacherly' role to be. In particular, Hjern, Alfven & Östberg, (2008) have identified high levels of academic pressure are most commonly associated with mental health problems – and given the analysis of *Brook College* and its intense culture of success thus far, we can

appreciate just how accurate these authors may have been proven to be publishing over 10 years ago. The institutional culture of success at all costs, the academic culture of high test scores and achievement, an intensification of work load and study expectations imposed on students to achieve against these demands, alongside instrumentalised reflexive procedures and imperatives to work on oneself, in *Brook College*, I believe have all contributed to an even greater intensification of academic pressure that are causing for many students, it would seem, profound and negative psychological and emotional effects.

8.1.6. Marketisation, commodification and (advanced late) capitalism

Given the now seemingly unquestioned agreement that the introduction of market forces in UK HE has resulted in its commodification, Miller (2010) asks: "what is being commodified in higher education?". Miller suggests we can understand what is being 'sold' to students based on a "credentialism model" (pp. 200), a "skills model" (pp. 202) and/or a "consumption model" (pp. 203). The last two are of interest here.

In the "skills model", Miller posits "the commodity being sold by universities is a set of skills" (pp. 202) which reshapes university as "'a roll-on-roll-off skilling factory' (Parker, 2003, pp. 529)." He argues that, through their degrees, universities 'sell' students a set of skills "that actually improve their capacity to work or function in the economy…", as opposed to simply selling 'credentials' that are supposed to have value in the/a marketplace.

In this respect, Miller notes how universities often encourage pedagogies that are explicitly skills-productive and eschew those that are not, something he sees as evident in the increasing focus on the acquisition of "transferrable skills" as well as in the focus on "learning outcomes and modularisation" (*ibid*). We could add 'employability' to his list. Miller concludes that, in this way, the "curriculum" is "degraded to a utilitarian techno-science […] based on the most crudely reductive means-end rationality (Lawson 1998, 273)." (pp. 202). I feel the same kinds of rationalities and logics

can be seen in *Brook College* and their focus on skills in the personal statement and latterly, the model of learning as investment. By positioning skills as the fundamental output, the essential value of learning, and the primary marker of their worth, students learn to approach education instrumentally as a 'skill-ing' vehicle, rather than a credentialising one. In this sense, their time and experiences of learning in *Brook College* represent a socialisation into the mode and purpose of education, and forms of learning, they will experience in HE.

However, in the "consumption model" (pp. 203), what students are being sold is, more profoundly, consumption itself. Miller (pp. 203) draws on Lyotard (1984) to argue that the postmodern turn resulted in "individuals [*becoming*] driven by a capitalist ideology that makes consumption a key motivational force" that has further "shaped the way in which students approach higher education" (pp. 203). Miller 'concludes' with the idea, refracted through the "consumption model", that contemporary students end up approaching HE as just "another consumption experience" (pp. 204) amid the many they are already exposed to and required to undertake.

Through the instrumental rationality of skills and students' 'purchase' of HE as a form of investment in their future and self-realisation, they are more fully socialised into the dominant capitalist modus operandi of production and consumption; or consumption *for* production. In other words: students learn the value of HE, and education more generally, in terms of what this consumption can produce for them therefore, learning the value of consumption *itself*.

Saltmarsh (2004), in her analysis of academic plagiarism noted earlier, utilises de Certeau's (1988) theories of production and consumption to examine academic plagiarism as a form of "consumptive practice" in the context of HE's "subscription to market ideologies" (pp. 446) concomitant with the construction of students as consumers and universities as providers. She (pp. 448-449) explains her reading of de Certeau's theories as such:

> "In his discussion of usage and consumption de Certeau argues that what cultural consumers 'make' or 'do' with the cultural products they purchase or consume

constitutes a form of production which is hidden, at once ubiquitous and silent. Consumption, for de Certeau (1988), is a form of production…"

I think we can relate Miller's (2010) and Saltmarsh's (2004) arguments to my interpretations in *Brook College* and consider their implications for prospective students of HE. However, to me, Miller may only be partially correct. Students at *Brook*, it seems, are implicitly positioned and produced to treat their education as an consumption experience in the sense of a productive investment in the(ir) future. Though, from Saltmarsh's (2004) work drawing on de Certeau's (1988) provocative theorisations, we could argue that students are more generally being socialised into the dominant capitalist ideology and practices of everyday life. Again, students are not *only* taught how to write their personal statements in relation to the dominant conventions of UCAS, nor through the rationality of the *A-Level Mindset* and procedures like "self-review" are they *only* being encouraged to become better self-managers to improve their academic performance and do better on tests. More acutely, students time in formal education, I believe, reflects a progressive socialisation into the global(ised) capitalistic relational order which stresses, above all else, the twinned ethics of consumption and production.

Varman, *et al.* (2011) uses Foucault's analytic of governmentality to examine how the forces of marketization in India's HE sector have fostered the "creation of a market subjectivity" (pp. 1164) among students and explores the effects this has on their social identities, learning behaviours and educational choices. They argue that a "[m]arket subjectivity results in the prevalence of an instrumental rationality" and "found that academic and non-academic activities were primarily driven by discourses of maximisation of returns" (pp. 1177). While that study examined HE students, and my study examined Level 3 students, it is clear from other work that these sorts of sensibilities are evident in children as young as 9 or 10, as described by Keddie (2016). Keddie takes as an *a priori* that for today's students, their experience of education have always been grounded in the framing

context of neoliberal performativity set within a global capitalist ideological system. As she contends, these "children of the market" – like those in *Brook College* – know no different.

It would seem reasonable to conclude that, in these respects, education represents a primary site for the continued (re)production of the capitalistic order and willing capitalist subjects thereby strengthening its ideological hegemony. Apple's (2004) work argues that formal schooling plays just such a role in the "'transmission' of culture" (pp. 30, *citing*: Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977, pp. 5) which, he notes, is how society (or more specifically, hegemony) stabilises and reinforces itself. Apple (*ibid*, pp. 30) contends that this "transmission" and stabilisation relies "upon a deep and often unconscious internalisation by the individual of the principles which govern the existing social order". In this respect, he rightly concludes, "the knowledge that […] gets into schools is not random" (pp. 60) but keenly corresponds to "commitments to specific economic structures" (pp. 61) that guide the content and form of schooling and school knowledge in specific historical, socio-political and economic contexts. The knowledge perpetuated by schools therefore has a normative and moral function achieved by reinforcing certain sets of 'shared values' relative to dominant ideologies – such as in the idea of learning as investment which fits with remoralised, neoliberal-entrepreneurial discourses reframing the nature, purpose and goals of education. This complex of discourses and socio-economic forces is also performative in that it produces a version of the world and along with it, certain kinds of student-subjects complementary to that world, able to function as they ought and reproduce the system 'as-it-is'.

Working with similar issues in the context of democratic schooling, Giroux (1988, pp. 24; 32) argues that the (re)production of shared meanings and values through education "represents an ideological construction of both sociality and subjectivity." He states: "Both schooling and the form of citizenship it legitimates can be deconstructed as a type of historical and ideological narrative that provides an introduction to, preparation for and, legitimation of particular forms of social life…". These processes of subjectivity production/subjectivisation, alike the 'regimes of truth' which give

rise to them, are "not random" (Apple, 2004, pp. 60). Rather, the subjectivities/subjects produced

are inextricably entwined with the dominant ideological discourses structuring our contemporary

world and lives. Through the instrumental rationality of skills refracted through an investment model

that stresses consumption *for* production in an endless cycle, and, through the technologies of

"vision", instrumentalised reflexive procedures and "resilience" which simultaneously individualise,

autonomise and responsibilise, the students at *Brook College* are being socialised into the norms,

'shared values' and trained in the skills required for a life that has always, and will (likely) always be,

organised against the imperatives of neoliberalism, performativity and capitalism.

8.2. Endpoints (2): *Methodological Reflections*

In my methodology chapters, I discussed many of the 'everyday' problems I faced attempting to work in an ethnographic, postmodern-poststructuralist frame. Here, I wish to continue to address some of those problems and consider their implications in terms of my developing/ed thinking about methodology and the conduct of inquiry.

8.2.1. Failure is the best teacher

Looking back now, in terms of methodology, I feel I learned the hard way. It seemed when I entered the field, I did little more than "utterly fail" (Geertz, 1973, pp. 143). Though, at the same time, my methodological and ethical challenges, dilemmas and 'failures' (Lather, 1994) provided me with an important opportunity to reflect on my experiences of/in the field and the processes of inquiry. This allowed me to reflexively engage with a variety of problematics of ethnographic inquiry operating in a postmodern-poststructuralist frame and, in this way, begin to learn important lessons.

Firstly, at the inception of our studies, it is important to keep in mind not simply the epistemic and practical limits of what we can know and plan for in advance to facilitate institutional procedures of study approval but, also, the historically contingent discursive trappings of context and tradition circulating in the academy which can restrict our thinking and doing in profound, but very often subtle and unknown, ways. Lather & St. Pierre (2013, pp. 630), in their article heralding the emergence of *Post-Qualitative Research* as a 'new' anti-foundational "refusal space" in social scientific inquiry, argue:

> "…we always bring tradition with us into the new, and it is very difficult to think outside our training, which, in spite of our best efforts, normalizes our thinking and doing."

Specifically, they argue that many of the dominant categories and concepts by which much of 'conventional' humanist qualitative(-interpretive) research methodology has traditionally been structured and understood, essentially, "assume [*a*] depth in which the human is superior to and separate from the material" (*ibid*). Hodgson & Standish (2009, pp. 320-321) similarly comment that "[*o*]ne implication[*s*] of the fixed categories – theory, practice, policy, philosophy [,*methodology*] – according to which educational research understands itself and tells its stories, *is the nature of reading it permits*." (*my emphasis*). Such a dominant, 'conventional', 'normalised', pre-coded "reading" of research act and researcher, as Lather & St. Pierre (2013, pp. 630) contend, translates itself into the fundamental assumption that the "doer exists before the deed, so the researcher can […] write a research proposal that outlines the doing before she begins. *The assumption is that there is actually a beginning, an origin, that she is not always already becoming in entanglement*" where "entanglement makes all these categories problematic" (*my emphasis*).

Reflecting on my own initial approaches to methodological planning, and its enactment upon entering the field, I feel I was largely ignorant of the 'baggage' of tradition and convention I carried with me. I felt I had tacitly – that is, uncritically – accepted a number of research ideas, concepts and practices 'at face value', but which I now realise carried a range of problematic onto-epistemologic positions and assumptions; simply, I had failed to question them. I now believe that I was only able to come to this realisation in the attempted enactment, and subsequent 'failure', of my plans in the field. These 'failures' highlighted the taken-for-granted and problematic status of many of the "categories" under which I had been operating in relation to the ethnographic, postmodern-poststructuralist perspectives that I sought to utilise in this work.

As Lather & St. Pierre suggest (*ibid*), the hegemonic discourses from which these dominant, 'conventional' categories and concepts spring and their routinely associated research practices – *alike all paradigms, methodologies and designs* – construct a specific image of the world and,

following Descartes, presuppose a fictive 'I' existing prior to (inter)action in that world. What is lost here, I believe, is the sense that no matter what our project may be, its subjects and objects, or when it is deemed to 'begin' that we, as co-constructors/co-producers imbricated in the very worlds and phenomena we seek to know and report, and embodied enactors of the ideas about and practices of research we use, are "always already becoming in entanglement". We cannot dislocate ourselves from the worlds of our inquiries so unproblematically; and nor is it possible to situate ourselves at some point above, beyond or outside the world/s of our participants in which we also live. Furthermore, the methodologies we enact to go about our 'knowing-work' do not come from nowhere. They are not value-free sets of technical procedures sharing the same ontological and epistemological commitments, standardised in such a way that they can be uniformly and unproblematically applied across contexts and situations to the same effects or ends. Rather, methodologies come from somewhere, and carry their own positions and assumptions on the world, knowledge and research – their "hinterlands" as Law (2004, pp. 27) would say. Moreover, methodologies take researchers to 'do' them. As such, they are performative, embodied, highly subjective and specific to both researcher and context of inquiry. Due to our unavoidable discursive positioning in the world and our performative, embodied methodological imbrications – *our entanglements* – I feel there is no reasonable way to separate research from researcher; nor support any of a whole host of the other philosophical or empirical separations that occur in many 'conventional' approaches to research.

To explore this idea further, in the following section I draw on the materialist-poststructural work of Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2007) and their philosophical imaginary of 'becoming-'. Importantly, I pick up the same critical theme I presented in *"…opening…"* and do not attempt to define what 'becoming-' 'is'. I do not endeavour to name its 'properties' as a concept, an imaginary, a metaphor, a method or research practice. This could be seen as an attempt to demonstrate a mastery of Deleuze & Guattari's work or to claim 'this is what it definitively is'. While the "rage for closure"

MacLure (2006, pp. 224) is powerful and seductive, it would be anathema and miss the point I hope to take on board, entirely. Instead, I discuss how I have thought (with) it and reflect on the enhanced understandings, 'new' onto-epistemological 'identifications' (Forbes, 2008; Hall, 1996), ethical positions and refined research practices, underpinned by a 'new' relation to power/knowledge, I feel this engagement has provoked.

8.2.2. *"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"*

For Delueze & Guattari (*ibid*), the notion of becoming foregrounds the processes of continuous production, transformation and change alongside the perpetual dynamism inherent in those differentiating movement/s. Instead of thinking '*becoming what?*', we should think of becoming in and of itself as "the very dynamism of change, situated between heterogenous terms and tending towards no particular goal or end-state" (Stagoll, 2005, IN: Parr, 2010, pp. 26). Hence, the hyphen that often follows it: *becoming-….* Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2007, pp. 293) say:

> "A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle [...] *a line of becoming has neither beginning or end, departure nor arrival, origin or destination* [...] *A line of becoming has only a middle*. [...] A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get to it by the middle. *A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between."* (*my emphasis*)

In becoming-, then, Delueze & Guattari ask us to embrace the idea that we are always already "intermezzo" (*ibid*, pp. 25), '*in the middle'*; entangled or rather, "becoming in entanglement" (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, pp. 630). There is no 'real' "beginning or end [...] origin or destination" thus challenging our traditional/conventional, empirical notions of starts and ends that, as alluded, fallaciously presuppose a doer existing before the deed, and a product before the process. Lather & St. Pierre (*ibid*) ask:

"…how do we determine the "object of our knowledge" – the "problem" we want to study in assemblage? *Can we disconnect ourselves from the mangle somehow (Self) and then carefully disconnect some other small piece of the mangle (Other) long enough to study it?* What ontology has enabled us to believe the world is stable so that we can do all that individuating? And at what price? How do we think a "research problem" in the imbrication of an agentic assemblage of diverse elements that are constantly intra-acting, never stable, never the same?" (*my emphasis*)

And, indeed, reflexive data from the field helped provoke thinking on my own imbrications and 'entanglements'. These, I feel, prompted a fundamental reconceptualisation of many of the research processes I was already engaged in alongside provoking a more attentive, in-depth and critically reflexive examination of many of the (unarticulated) onto-epistemologic positions, perspectives and assumptions that structured my thinking and doing, both in and out of the field. The following reflexive extract from my fieldnotes shows just such a 'moment' that prompted reflections of this kind:

> I attended a Pastoral Tutor Group Lesson delivered by James (A-Level Pastoral Mentor) where he began his lesson with a 'starter' activity. Students and I were called into the classroom and, projected on the whiteboard as we entered, was a curious animation of a spinning ballet dancer. While the students and I took our seats, James asked us to identify which direction the dancer was spinning. This created confusion and intense debate as some saw the dancer spinning clockwise, others anti-clockwise. James told us this was the famous "silhouette illusion" and informed the class some indeed may see it moving one way and others, the other way. Both are 'right'; both are 'wrong'; and, yet, neither.
>
> At any rate, this unusual perceptual activity stuck with me for many months; every time I thought about this lesson and the "silhouette illusion" I was reminded of the poem "Among School Children" by W.B. Yeats (1928):
>
> "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

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How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

(*my emphasis*)

Lather & St. Pierre (*ibid*) pose an intriguing series of questions above: "Can we disconnect ourselves from the mangle somehow […] then carefully disconnect some other small piece of the mangle […] to study it? What ontology has enabled us to believe the world is stable so that we can do all that individuating? […] How do we think a "research problem" in the *imbrication of an agentic assemblage of diverse elements that are constantly intra-acting, never stable, never the same?*" (*ibid, my emphasis*). I began to feel this "ontology" was equivalent to a position that would seduce us to believe that we can, in fact, "know the dancer from the dance*"; that we can separate the doer from the deed, or a product before the process. The idea of dancer-dance, when combined with the 'post-qualitative' provocations of Lather & St. Pierre and countless others, seemed to me to offer a fruitful pedagogical, metaphorical lens through which I could explore the onto-epistemologic and methodologic 'failures' (Lather, 1994) and problematics I encountered, such as that of becoming-*in*-entanglement, starts, 'middle/s' and ends, and of the very practices and processes of this research along with my place/role in it.

It is difficult (*for me at least*) to understand any way in which to reasonably separate the dancer from the dance, the researcher from the research and further, from the researched (the "*(Other)*") because firstly, our methodological thinking and the practices by which we enact our plans based on this thinking, are so deeply highly subjective that we must account for the 'I' conducting the inquiry as may be apparent, for example, in the subjective and value-laden processes of analysis and interpretation by which we construct our accounts. Secondly, and more profoundly still however, if we ascribe to a performative-discursive view of the world and subjectivity, then surely we must also appreciate how *we* are always already implicated in the continual and transformative, embodied performance of, and therefore *production of*, the very world, persons and phenomena of our inquiries including our-selves. The same is also necessarily the case for our methodological ways of

knowing. These are not 'given'. Rather, in a manner of speaking, we 'breathe life' into our methodologies by performatively enacting them in specific ways and engaging in certain practices of knowing (each with their own onto-epistemic "hinterlands" (Law, 2004, pp. 27)) that *produce* the 'assemblage' of the world, ourselves, our knowing practices and the objects of our knowing work, together.

It is also worthy of note, I believe, that there is a(nother) kind of refusal in the story above; a refusal to see 'data' as being always, only and essentially *about* substantive issues separable from methodological issues. In this instance (and many more uncited here), 'data' ostensibly about 'substance' doubled itself, helping me to reflexively explore myself and my knowing practices in order to disrupt and "unsettle the still core of habit and order" (MacLure, 2006, pp. 224) disciplining my methodological thinking to focus instead on process, becoming and entanglement; the dancer and the dance.

It is at this point that I would like to draw attention to the emerging onto-epistemic fields of posthumanism and 'new' materialism – and reflect on how the insights of these fields might relate to the new, enhanced ideas, beliefs and understandings I feel I arrived at through a critical engagement with/in this work. Towards the 'end' of this project, I became aware of these (apparently) 'new' fields of onto-epistemologic theorising and their (dis)connections to postmodern and poststructuralist thought – yet, in truth, I never quite explored their insights in any meaningful way because I naively felt that to expose myself to such 'new' ideas, at such a late stage, would potentially cloud my thinking and writing.

It is only, *now*, at the 'end' with the benefit of hindsight and a more in-depth commitment to critical reflexivity toward myself and the entirety of the research act, that I can appreciate how the changes and transformations in my thinking regarding onto-epistemology and methodology perhaps

resonate with a number of the critical contributions of these 'new' fields. In the following '***Aside***',

then, I explore some of these contributions falling under the labels of 'post-humanism' and/or ''new'

materialism' said to mark a contemporary "ontological turn" (St. Pierre, 2014, pp. 2) in the social

sciences. I also reflect on how these insights might relate to the emerging understandings I have

offered thus far in this discussion.

Aside*: An unsettling encounter with post-humanism and 'new' materialism*

It would seem of no great wisdom, to my mind, to assert that the notion of 'human' is a

fundamentally central concept or figure, and the primary actor, around which much of what we

(think we're) do(ing) in qualitative social scientific research is organised. Kruger (2016, pp. 77) notes

how "most educational research" today (still) operates on the basic presupposition of (the category

of) "human as an ontological given and treats education 'as a practice of humanization' (Snaza, 2013,

pp. 38)." This pre-supposed figure, then, plays out in our everyday onto-epistemological and

methodological thinking and doing. It is a contemporary legacy of the unified, conscious,

independent/autonomous, rational subject of humanism; a figure that also resonates with the vision

of (western and white) 'Man' of early Liberal Humanism still present, if not modified, in its (post-

)modern cousin, neoliberalism (Davies, 2018). We can see this (pre-supposed) 'subject' in, for

instance, Freire's work (Clough, 2009; Lather, 2012) which is now widely considered amongst the

most seminal texts of a de facto 'canon' for all those involved in the study and practice of Education.

As a result, we routinely leave unquestioned the historically accepted, essentialist construction of

the people of our inquiries (and ourselves) *as 'human'*. We operate as if this was/is self-evident and

therefore, fail to truly expose this figure to the same kinds of critical scrutiny almost all other aspects

of research have been over the last half a century or more in the social sciences. For instance, in one

form or another in our research work we primarily deal with people – *their identities, lived*

experiences, 'voices', social practices, their relations, groups and culture/s, etc. – very often in the

form of their visible behaviours and utterances that we take as our primary analytic-interpretive 'raw material/s'. Sometimes we go about this work with a view to developing 'new' or confirming existing theory. These theories, again, are often based on similar 'primary' research on or with people carried out in similar fashion. Sometimes we go about this work with a view to intervening or providing others with the capacity and wherewithal to intervene themselves in the world, for (what we hope is) the 'better'. What is clear to me in this conventional, dominant mode is that the ontologic category of 'human(s)' is almost invariably unquestioned. I must confess to just such a critical 'blindness' myself.

More than this, though, the notion of 'human' is positioned at the very heart of our everyday understandings of what we do, how and why, and, it could be said, is the objective towards which all our research efforts are fundamentally directed. Even though it may be so taken for granted that it goes routinely unnoticed or unarticulated, it would seem that much of today's qualitative work is understood and practiced based on a range of deeply embedded foundational *humanist* assumptions. These assumptions are not simply about the nature of the world, the practices by which we attempt to 'know' a part of it and the purposes of this work, but speak to the very notion of what 'is' and what it means to be 'human'. These are assumptions that take 'human' to be ontologicaly prior, independent and separate from the world they are both constitutive of and constituted by in ways that are potentially deeply problematic. Karen Barad (2007, pp. 19) – an influential theorist of the emerging 'post-human' and 'new' materialist onto-epistemic fields – insists that most research today operates on the fundamental humanist assumption that the "world is populated with individual things with their own sets of determinate properties". This results in hierarchical subject-object relations that, for Snaza & Weaver (2014), progressively distance the researcher from the circumstances, context and people of their work. This, in turn, reinforces the notion of the 'knowing/expert human' in a position of central power, above and beyond the machinations of the world, people and phenomenon contained therein. It supposes a dancer separate from the dance.

For instance, it is highly likely in qualitative-interpretive educational research that we gather our analytic 'raw materials' through essentially humanist, ethnographic methods and field practices and interpret them using conventionally associated analytic techniques in ways that, explicitly or not, suppose to look past or beyond the everyday discourses or narratives, performativities or performances, fabrications and 'gloss' of the social world, people and our constructions of them, to develop an understanding of a/the (more?) '*real*' person, world or phenomena lying behind them; this is perhaps the "violence of interpretation" and analysis Baudrillard (1984, pp. 30) notes. In other words: we routinely operate under the assumption that 'scientific' knowledge mediates access to the 'real' (material) world or maybe the '*real* real', in whatever representational form. This is what essentially characterises the deeply embedded humanist impulses evident in much contemporary, 'conventional' qualitative educational research today. In recent years, critiques of this position have been mounted particularly from within the critical frames of the "post" (St. Pierre, 2014, pp. 2) philosophies. The principle problematisation of such 'conventional' humanist methodologies emerging from such an engagement is alluded to by St. Pierre (*ibid*, pp. 3, emphasis in original) who notes:

> "…I suspect my history is similar to that of others […] who were trained in humanist qualitative methodology even as they *separately* studied postmodern critiques of the humanist epistemology and ontology that makes that methodology unthinkable."

Kruger (2018, pp. 77, *my emphasis*) argues that "…although the notion of the human as an ontological given has been critiqued in a sustained manner for at least the last forty years as reflected in Foucault's (1994, p.387) assertion [*sic*] that 'as the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of a recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end' *this critique, and the implications thereof, is not reflected in most educational research discourse*". This is perhaps especially evident in work that situates and aligns itself with/in the onto-epistemological frames and theories of postmodernism and/or poststructuralism, as gestured by St. Pierre above.

So, what might it be to (re?)challenge the ontologic *a priori* 'human' supposed as central to what we

understand ourselves and others to be, what we do in our research and as the telos to which all of

our activities appear to be directed? What are we to do when we are no longer 'human', or when

this category is no longer available or has no empirical credence? And additionally, what might it be

instead to (re)focus more so on matter, the material or materiality, on becoming, entanglement,

relationality, agency and affect? These are precisely the kinds of challenges and provocations

brought about by an (unsettling) encounter with the emerging field of posthuman and 'new'

materialist ontologies and subjectivities evident in the work of, for example, Karen Barad (1996,

2003, 2007), Rosa Braidotti (2011, 2013) and Bruno Latour's (2005) Actor Network Theory.

Barad (2007, pp. 132) tells us: "Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is [*now*]

an important sense in which the only thing that doesn't seem to matter anymore, is matter".

Therefore, it could be said that these 'new' perspectives take up *anew* and (perhaps) elaborate

forgotten, neglected or misunderstood aspects of postmodern, and especially, poststructuralist

critiques by (re)focusing this critical attention on the ontologic pre-given of 'human' constructed in

essentialist terms and on materiality, entanglement, relationality, agency and affect.

Firstly, though, it should be noted (as alluded to earlier and through my consistent use of inverted

commas) that this '*new*' critical project may not be as new as the quotes/discussion suggests. Davies

(2018, pp. 113), for instance, quotes Barad (IN: Juelskjær & Schwennesen, 2012, pp. 16) who argues:

> "…creativity is not about crafting the new through a radical break with the past. It's
> a matter of discontinuity, neither continuous or discontinuous in the usual sense. It
> seems to me that it's important to have some kind of way of thinking about change
> that doesn't presume there's either more of the same or a radical break.
> Dis/continuity is a cutting together-apart (one move) that doesn't deny creativity
> and innovation but understands its indebtedness and entanglements to the past and
> the future."

Initially at least, according to Davies (2018), the emerging posthuman and 'new' materialist fields

have been understood as a radical and creative extension of postmodern but particularly

poststructuralist thought, rather than a fundamental 'break' or departure from them. For Davies,

taking off from Barad's work, it is important to recognise and understand the dis/connections of

posthuman and 'new' materialist ontologies *with* postmodernism and poststructuralism as "neither

continuous or discontinuous". She also believes we should set out to try to understand their

"indebtedness and entanglements to the past" and the 'posts'; the "cutting together-apart".

For me, this is important for two reasons. Firstly, it is because these 'new' ontologies and epistemic

perspectives and practices may actually offer 'new' and elaborated positions and frames from which

we can begin to challenge our common "post-human present" said to describe "the radically

hybridised world we presently inhabit" (Kruger, 2018, pp. 77; *see* Hayles, 1999). This may facilitate

engaging in a critique and redefinition of humanist qualitative methodologies helping us to

experiment with "post-qualitative" (St. Pierre, 2013, 2014; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) work that may

take us into the "new new" (Spivak, 1999, pp. 68). Secondly, and most critically importantly to me, it

is because it may be that such 'new' perspectives highlight just how we may have historically

ignored, neglected or misunderstood and practically 'misused' (*see* Hodgson & Standish, 2009)

aspects of postmodern and poststructuralist theories and critiques by selecting-out specific (sets of)

ideas as positions or analytics or methods, using them instrumentally thereby failing to appreciate

their ramifying (post-human and/or materialist) onto-epistemologic assumptions.

I wish to revisit here some of the discussions from *"…opening…"*: At a cursory level, many of those

routinely labelled 'postmodernist' or 'poststructuralist' explicitly refused these external disciplinary

identifications, Foucault being a notable example. From the lens of posthumanism and 'new'

materialism, it would seem odd that Foucault is labelled a 'postmodernist' or a 'poststructuralist'

despite the fact that much of his work appeared to be dedicated to problematising and challenging

the notion of the autonomous, rational subject of Early Liberalism/Liberal Humanism, as Kruger

above references. In discussions of governmentality, for example, Foucault argued that rationalities

of government set the "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1994, pp. 8) by "…*arranging things*, so

that *people*, following their own self-interest, will do as they ought" (Scott, 1995, pp. 202). It is

interesting to note that the 'things' to which Foucault refers are, in fact, both abstracted conceptual

apparatuses and material objects as well as 'men': "[*the*] *'things'* with which in this sense

government is concerned are in fact *men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication*

with those other things […] What counts essentially is this *complex of men and things*" (Foucault,

1991, pp. 93-94, *my emphasis*). I think, even from this simple example, we can clearly see the

posthuman and materialist ideas at play in aspects of his work that equally highlight just how

'absent' this understanding may be in the way his work is commonly utilised in research (*see* Allen,

2012).

More directly still, in the foreword to a compendium of his most significant works and interviews,

Rabinow (1994, pp. xxxvi, *my emphasis*) cites Foucault, saying:

> "Foucault came to conceive of the most general name for the practice he was
>
> seeking to identify: "problematization" […] [*That*] "The proper task of a history of
>
> thought is: to *define the conditions in which human beings 'problematize' what they*
>
> *are,* what they do, and the world in which they live."

We can read Foucault's statements, here, with posthuman and 'new' materialist lenses. Aspects of

Deleuze & Guattari's work is also often referenced in poststructuralist-informed work yet the

posthuman and materialist positions undergirding much of their work are largely not attended to.

This was true of my own work, here, of course.

Kruger (2018, pp. 78) has argued that "post-humanism" has grown outwards from "anti-humanist,

postcolonial, anti-racism and material feminist theories" aligning with poststructuralism and as such,

does not signal itself as an isolated "progression or historical moment" (Pedersen, 2010, pp. 242) indicating the 'end' of foundational humanism. Instead, it marks a concerted effort to problematize the onto-epistemological assumptions and perspectives that provide the conditions for conceiving of the essentialist idea of 'human' that we currently possess and that possesses us. Fox & Alldred (2018, pp. 6), likewise, note how the variety of 'new' materialisms draw insights from affect and non-representational theory. At the same time, they highlight how, in particular, Deleuze & Guattari's theorisations of a "microphysics of becoming" and materiality have provided the fertile (rhizomatic?) ground for the '*new*' materialists.

More recently, Donna Haraway (1991) explored the 'transhuman', i.e. the permeability of the boundaries supposed to separate human, non-human animal and technology/machine, offering the contemporary cultural imaginary of the 'cyborg' to highlight (post-)modern uncertainty and ambivalence in relation to the human form and condition. This feels particularly relevant in an age of bio-technological innovation, intervention, modification and even, prosthesis; "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of [*science*] fiction." (pp. 149). I also think there are resonances, in Haraway's work, with Baudrillard's (1984, pp. 66, 72) vexing theorisations in *Simulacra and Simulation* of the "clone" and "hologram":

> "Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: *it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again*, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death [...] when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death. [...] Similitude is a dream and must remain one [...] One must never pass over to the side of the real, the side of the exact resemblance of the world to itself, of the subject to itself. Because then the image disappears. One must never pass over to the side of the double, because then the dual relation disappears, and with it all seduction."

This brief excursion certainly suggests that post-humanism and materialism are not truly 'new'. However, despite the lack of a clear lineage or disciplinary consensus' amid these 'new' trends, "[*w*]hat all of these different orientations hold in common is a shared interest to decentre the human subject through re-embedding it in the relational networks that it is composed of" (Kruger, 2018, pp. 79) provoking us to reconceive of 'human' as "something other than human" (Snaza, 2013, pp. 50), as relational and situated, affecting and affected, so we can "refuse what we are" (Foucault, 1982, p. 216).

What is central to the emerging fields of post-humanism and 'new' materialism, as I see it, is a fundamental challenge to the problematic ontologic *a priori* (category) of 'human'. This is in order to subvert the traditional and conventional human-nonhuman, human-material or nature-culture dichotomies that pervade our subjectivities and work, and (re)focus attention to the performative interdependence and mutual, immanent co-constitution of human, non-human, inhuman, 'transhuman' and material features of the world, together. Likewise, and perhaps exhibiting its deep poststructural convergences, such perspectives also seek to destabilise and problematise other distinctions and binaries such as subject/object, subjectivity/objectivity, language/discourse, agency/structure and being/becoming.

The recent interest arose initially, I believe, in part from problematisations of human exceptionalism and instrumentalism (Zembylas & Bozalek, 2014) pursued through complicating and reconceiving the relationality and importantly, separation/s, of humans, non-human animals, environment, technologies and matter we routinely enact in our research work in order to open up the possibilities that may be offered by posthuman and materialist subjectivities. It is in this respect we can perhaps see most clearly how posthuman or, more accurately post-anthropocentric (Briadotti, 2013), and 'new' materialist perspectives have seen a significant uptake by cultural geographers and ecological/environmental sustainability researchers to engage with the devastating planetary effects

of the Anthropocene that foundational humanist perspectives and modes of life have created and compound.

Post-human and 'new' materialist ontologies, then, have been positioned under what has been referred to as the 'new' "ontological turn" (St. Pierre, 2014, pp. 2), the "turn to materiality and affectivity" (Kruger, 2018, pp. 87), or more simply, the "'turn to matter'" (Fox & Alldred, 2018, pp. 2) in social science. Karen Barad and Rosa Braidotti appear to be two of the most significant theorists of these 'new' fields who respectively have produced provocative and insightful critiques of foundational humanism and offer 'new' onto-epistemologic theories and concepts with which to engage with/in more posthuman and materialist perspectives, analyses and subjectivities.

While Barad's work is extensive perhaps her 'key' conceptual contribution in her materialist onto-epistemology is her notion of "intra-action" (2007, pp. 140), used to theorise ideas of entanglement and becoming to subvert the routine separation of subject and object. Barad (2003, pp. 802, *my emphasis*) attempts to (re)clarify a performative understanding of the world and the "misconception that would equate performativity with a form of linguistic monism which takes language *as the stuff of reality*" thereby supporting representationlist beliefs and practices. "Discourse" she says, "is not a synonym for language", nor is it "what is said" via "spoken or written words" – even though it may be routinely conceptualised, understood and dealt with in these ways – but, is the system that "constrains and enables what can be said" (*ibid*, pp. 819). Performativity, she clarifies, "is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words" (*ibid,* pp. 802) which is often what appears to happen through research and the writing of research. However, it is between these two 'misconceived' understandings that we reinforce the "metaphysical substrate" that simultaneously supports "social constructionist, as well as traditional realist, beliefs" (*ibid*) which, in turn, draw on beliefs about representation that imply the 'word' is the 'object'. Barad (*ibid*, pp. 811) quotes Deleuze (1988, pp. 65) who argues: "As long as we stick to things and words, we can believe

that we are speaking of what we see, that we see what we are speaking of, and that the two are linked." Instead, contrary to this, Barad's "posthumanist notion of performativity […] incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors" (2003, pp. 808) in a move away from problematic dichotomies and the illusions of representation.

Taking off from a critical reading of the Nobel winning work of Nils Bohr in the field of quantum mechanics/theory, Barad develops a "relational ontology" (*ibid*, pp. 812), problematising the representationalist beliefs in objectivity and the binary separation of subject and object that supports it; that is, the "belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing." (*ibid*, pp. 804). Barad refuses to take as given the *a priori* ontologic separation of subject and object; or, based on Bohr's work, "the inseparability of the 'observed object' and the 'agencies of observation'" (*ibid*, pp. 814) that characterised the 'collapse of the wave function' and 'uncertainty principle' in quantum theory. Barad insists we cannot differentiate between the object and the observer; or at the very least, we should acknowledge that the materialisation of the object depends on the "specific material circumstances" (Hinton, 2013, p.178) used in observation and measurement. For Barad (2007, pp. 113-114), then, there is "no unambiguous way to differentiate between the 'object' and the 'agencies of observation'"; no way to erect and maintain a "divide between the speaking subject and mute objects" (Bennet, 2010, pp. 108), or conceptualise each as such, that accounts for their constitutive, entangled becomings. The difference/s that may exist between a knower, an 'object' and the 'agencies of observation' is not ontologically prior but only emerges in and through the complexly entangled becomings of these elements together, immanently. Perhaps, in this, we can also note the influence of Deleuze's *Difference & Repetition* (1968) in Barad's thinking.

Because 'things' – including *ourselves* (or our-selves) here – cannot be differentiated *a priori*, apart from or outside of their entangled becomings, then, what material-*ises* is already "at once an instance of a whole" (Hinton, 2013, p.179). This leads Barad (2007, pp. 140; *see also* Barad, 2003) to posit that all elements of the world are mutually constitutive/constituted, created immanently in/via "intra-action", emphasising their ontologic inseparability implicated in continuous becomings *with* one another ad infinitum; "The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity" she says (Barad, 2007, p.140). It is important not to confuse Barad's "intra-action" with *inter*-action – a term that supposes two pre-existing entities, separate but intermingling, in some pre-existing space. This would seem to give sense to how a range of 'new' materialism*s* have been described as offering an "ontology of immanence" (Fox & Alldred, 2018, pp. 2), or a "flat ontology" (*ibid*, pp. 3) as it seeks to connect the production of the world and everything social and material 'in' it together and further, draw them onto a single 'plane' to support more materially attentive analyses. Deleuze's (1992, 1994) reading of Spinoza's (2006) 'substance monism' is connected to this, where he argues that, Spinozan 'substance' is actually an endlessly differentiating process *of* becoming.

To separate the knower from the 'thing' to be known and from the mechanisms of knowing, that is to hold 'human' as separate and distinct, is an already flawed position, according to Barad, leading her to state: "[w]e do not obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; *we know because we are of the world*" (2007, pp. 185, *my emphasis*). This is an understanding that is perhaps deeply embedded in qualitative work that recognises situatedness and the need for reflexivity. It is our unavoidable entanglement:

> "We are, she [*i.e. Barad*] argues, entangled in many more forces than we can possibly be aware of, and 'To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. 'Existence', she says, 'is not an individual affair' (Barad, 2007, p. ix)." (Davies, 2018, pp. 116)

Therefore, as Kruger (2018, pp. 80-81, *my emphasis*) suggests, "what we conceive of as reality is not composed of separate *things-in-themselves* that exist on an ontological level [*as would support beliefs about objectivity and representation*], but rather a relational, entangled and affective phenomenon that is always already becoming as the world encounters itself". In other words, we focus on "how specific intra-actions matter." (Barad, 2007, pp. 185).

Reality is constructed, instead, by "things-*in*-phenomena" (Barad, 1996, pp. 176, *my emphasis*), i.e. "intra-action[s]" that constitute the event, phenomena or action together with interactions with observers and 'agencies of observation'. As such, all phenomena, events, actions and persons are unavoidably immanent and context-specific productions, leading Barad to argue that 'intra-actions' within a phenomenon enact a specific "agential reality" (*ibid*, pp. 177) that includes both object and observer, the methods of observing and their affective relations. Thus, in the context of research, since our paradigms and methodologies are not neutral, innocent or arise *ex nihilo*, and since we are always situated *somewhere*, we enact a particular "agential cut" (Barad, 2007, pp. 185) that establishes a particular vantage point on the object of study, and this reflects an onto-epistemological move when we make specific methodological choices. For Fox & Alldred (2018), Barad, here, demonstrates links with Haraway's (1997, pp. 16) "diffractive" methodological approaches that attempt to incorporate researcher situatedness, experiences and insights, and makes these central to analysis such that we may indicate the (methodological and/or contextual) 'cuts' in how data is gathered and analysed (*see* Taguchi & Palmer, 2013). The knowledge we produce through our research, and ourselves therefore, are always already situated, partial, fragmented and performative as we are always already embedded and embodied in the enactment – *the performance* – of our research practices and context; "knowing is not bounded or a closed practice but an ongoing performance of the world" (Barad, 2007, p.149).

Fox & Alldred (2018, pp. 11-12) argue that using the concept of "intra-action", we could engage in a "micropolitical material analysis […] applied to the research process, and to specific research designs and methods" by viewing and unpacking the research act as an "assemblage", an excessive and disorganised Gestalt, composed of but by no means reducible to a "series of simpler research machines" each dedicated to "undertake specific tasks within a research process such as data collection, data analysis or ethical review" wherein "[e]ach machine has a specific affective flow between event, instruments and researchers that make it work". Such a materialist analysis of research as assemblage demonstrates that all paradigms, methodologies, designs and methods carry "specific affective flow[s]" and relations that connect events, researchers/researched and data, and that produces effects *in* that data enabling (or equally, closing off) certain kinds of output. This analytic conceptualisation, then, permits all aspects of the research to be opened up to ongoing critical and reflexive examination and adjustment.

Rosa Briadotti is another influential theorist, more particularly aligned with posthuman ontologies and an exploration of non- or anti-anthropocentric 'post-humanities', who, in similar fashion to Barad, critiques foundational humanism alongside human exceptionalism and instrumentalism. Briadotti's most significant contributions, to my mind, are her ideas regarding "nomadic post-humanism" (2013).

For Braidotti (2013), the point of departure is similar; a critique of foundationalist, humanist assumptions that support anthropocentric/exceptionalist human notions of the centrality of (western and white) 'Man' "as the self-appointed measure of all things" (pp. 15). Much alike the poststructuralist work of Judith Butler, Briadotti (2011, pp. 139) extends and focuses on the materiality of the body to develop a post-human, nomadic, feminist-materialist theory of body and subjectivity turning instead to "life in its inhuman aspects". Braidotti's conception of matter (including the matter of lived and living bodies) is vital, possessing the ability to be affected as well

as affect, and does not stand in opposition to or with 'culture'. In this way she advocates crosscutting the kinds of dualisms, dichotomies and Cartesian bifurcations, such as human/animal or nonhuman, man/woman, culture/nature and mind/body, that appear to resonate with aspects of feminist poststructural work. As a foothold for experimenting with the "posthumanities", Braidotti's "subject […] is not 'Man' (Bradiotti, 2013, pp. 169) but rather the processes of change and becoming of the natural and social world, and an ecology of the human and the non-human in which neither is distinguished from, or privileged over the other" (Fox & Alldred, 2018, pp. 8). Demonstrating her anti-anthropocentric ideas and commitments, Braidotti's work advocates moving past organic, naturalist, anthropocentric and essentialist understandings of 'life' towards a "minor science" (Delueze & Guattari, 1987/2007, pp. 361) that pays critical attention to the practices, flows and fluxes in/of becoming in entangled assemblages to overcome wearisome distinctions of the 'soft' social and 'hard' physical sciences, and connecting these to the '(post-)humanities'.

Braidotti, as such, calls for a "nomadic subjectivity that relinquishes the stable, self-contained subject premised on a dialectical relation to the other for a subjectivity that is always in the process of becoming-*other* through the actualisation of new relations" (Kruger, 2018, pp. 81). She draws on Deleuze's interpretation of the Spinoza's (2006) vital 'substance monism' (as noted earlier) arguing for the affectivity all bodies and the unity of all matter, thereby supporting a perspective of radical immanence whereby we see the "[*nomadic*] subject as [*sic*] fully immersed in and immanent to a network of nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral) relations…". This, Braidotti (2013, pp. 94) argues, "…is an act of unfolding of the self onto the world and the enfolding within of the world". So too, Braidotti's relational and affective materialist, post-human ontology demonstrates how 'humans' are neither pure cause nor effect, but part and parcel of their relational becoming-with/in the world, destabilising the idea that agency is the sole preserve of 'human' actants but applies, equally, to all matter. This leads onto an understanding of the world, and research, as an endlessly becoming and

transforming assemblage, working to decentralise the *a priori* 'human' in favour of relationality, affectivity and performativity.

Finally, it is worth briefly discussing Bruno Latour's (2005) Actor Network Theory (*hereafter,* ANT) as it relates to 'new' post-human and 'new' materialist ontologies. Initially, Latour, Collen and Law helped develop the theory and discipline in the 1980's in France that later migrated to the UK. Indeed, we can see clearly these influences in Law's (2004) later work, *After Method.* Though, alike many of the labels we have encountered thus far, a lack of consensus regarding the name (and character) of ANT abounds. For example, Law (2004) appears to prefer the term "material semiotics"; Mol (1999), "ontological politics"; even Latour (1999, pp. 19, IN: Law & Hassard, 1999) himself once reflected on the fact "actant-rhizome ontology" was perhaps a better term if only he felt anyone "would have cared for such a horrible mouthful of words" (*ibid*).

Principally speaking, ANT was developed in the field of science and technology studies and this can be seen to account for its most central and significant positions with regards posthuman (or more accurately for ANT, 'nonhumanist') 'new' materialism – that is, the role and operation of material objects in the constitution of the social world. ANT as a "an episode in the history of French poststructuralism" (Muinesa, 2015, pp. 81) and social theory, thus sought to surmount the dichotomies of dominant strands and positions of social theory such as subject/object, human/nonhuman machine, nature/culture and agency/structure. ANT therefore was/is applied in order to provide a materialist/posthuman sociology of technology and technological apparatuses, and to the practice of scientific inquiry itself. Within the framework of ANT, agency is central; it is ascribed to a range of 'things' in transient material networks – i.e. assemblages – that draw in human and nonhuman "actants" (Latour, 2005, pp. 54) (*not 'actors' as is the common ethnomethodological terminology*) and thus supposes the affective capacity of all matter. Rather than 'actor', it is an 'actant' to which we refer – a discursive 'thing' at once semiotic *and* material

that interferes with the distributed action of situations and events. Any actant, then, is dependent on the relations established between and among entities which its identity is derived from, the relations it enters into and within which it is placed. The 'network' of ANT designates any aggregation, association or assemblage of heterogeneous human and nonhuman elements. Blok (2013, pp. 9) offers a 'real world' example: "For Louis Pasteur to become the scientific icon that he is today, he needed first to enrol the microscope, the anthrax bacillus, the vaccine, and the pest-ridden late-19th-century French agriculture into his laboratory network." The networks of ANT, then, are rhizomatic assemblages in a Deleuzian sense; they are a-centred or de-centred, follow no order or 'deep structure', are dynamic and ever-changing, moving from micro to macro, and back again.

Of the broad field of ANT, I believe its critical contribution is an understanding of (social) life as heterogenous and multiplicitous and "in which bits and pieces from the social, the technical, the conceptual and the textual are fitted together" (Law, 1992, pp. 381). This challenges the common idea that 'the social' is a realm distinct from all others, only accessible or laid bare through our specialised scientific methods (Latour, 2005). This is borne out by Latour & Woolgar's (1979) observations of scientific practice at the Salk Institute, discussed at length by Law (2004, pp. 31, *emphasis in original*): "…they are telling us that it is not possible to separate out (a) the making of particular *realities*, (b) the making of particular *statements* about those realities, and (c) the creation of *instrumental, technical and human configurations and practices*, the inscription devices that produce these realities and statements." And, in this respect, we can see how Latour & Woolgar's theorisations – ones that led to Latour being invited to work at the Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, École des Mines de Paris, where he was central to the development of ANT – dovetails with the posthuman, materialist views of Barad (in particular).

ANT suggests that the nexus and foci of inquiry should not be to apprehend, describe and/or explain social forces or structures, but to examine how a diverse range of heterogenous elements from a

range of (supposedly) different domains – the physical, bio-chemical, economic, semiotic, etc. – produce various social formations, networks, aggregations and groups, such as nations, societies, institutions, social groups and aspects of 'human' culture. The idea of 'human' could perhaps be seen, itself, as such an aggregation; it is an assemblage.

So, if we are to take seriously the insights and contributions in the 'new new' of posthumanist and 'new' materialist ontologies amid the work of Barad, Braidotti, Latour, Mol and Deleuze (& Guattari) and others, we ought to ask ourselves serious questions and reconsider what it is we understand education, and educational research, to be? What is it we research when 'human' is no longer available to us? What are we, when we are no longer 'human'? How do we go about our research? How do we understand our subjects and objects of study when they and we are always already becoming-in-entanglement? So, I will 'end' this section where we 'began', by redirecting attention to Lather & St. Pierre's (2013, pp. 630) problematising questions:

> "…how do we determine the "object of our knowledge" – the "problem" we want to study in assemblage? Can we disconnect ourselves from the mangle somehow (Self) and then carefully disconnect some other small piece of the mangle (Other) long enough to study it? What ontology has enabled us to believe the world is stable so that we can do all that individuating? And at what price? How do we think a "research problem" in the imbrication of an agentic assemblage of diverse elements that are constantly intra-acting, never stable, never the same?"

These are the central problematics with which educational research will have to deal with *in the future* that is the becoming-*now,* in light of the 'new' fields that seek to shatter some of our most deeply ingrained and essentialised assumptions and categories. But, since "[t]he present is […] what we are and, thereby, what already we are ceasing to be" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p.112), it allows for this understanding of this unfolding future as the becoming-present; "the infinite Now […] not an instant but a becoming […] *it is the now of our becoming.*" (*ibid*, *my emphasis*).

8.2.3. Working (through) the "stuck places" (Lather, 2011): *beginning again, and again, and again….*

Following Patti Lather (2011), I felt the only way through the methodological and ethical "stuck places" (pp. 476) of this study was to reflexively 'work its/my failures' "as a way to keep moving […] and learn" (pp. 482) (*see* Ellsworth, 1997, pp. xi). To reflexively pursue such a destabilisation of the taken-for-granted practices and assumptions I now feel were governmentalising my methodological and ethical thinking, I engaged with a wide variety of philosophical, socio-theoretical and methodological literature. Particularly, postmodern and poststructural framed critiques of onto-epistemology and conventional ethnographic methodology – not that such coherent or unambiguous 'fields' exist to which these terms wholly correspond. In my reading I came across the following provocative expression from Mazzei (2010, pp. 515):

> "And so *I begin again, and begin again, attempting to negotiate with a map that is changing, with an image I must discard, and with a vocabulary I must unthink*." (*my emphasis*)

Alike Mazzei (*ibid*), I increasingly felt throughout this study that I too needed to constantly "begin again and begin again" in light of the dilemmas and failures causing my plans to disintegrate and destabilising the onto-epistemological and methodological "categories" structuring my subjectivity. For instance, in the writing of my interpretive accounts, I profoundly felt like I kept needing to start again and again and again after feeling "lost" (Lather, 2007), struggling to construct eloquent, insightful stories and feeling as if I was producing the 'correct' product.

I feel I came to learn the hard way that we, in large part, (re)produce the hegemony of the dominant categories by which we routinely understand the research act; in this way, I felt I had inadvertently colluded in *my own* governmentalizing "illusions" (Baumann, 1993, pp. 32). For instance, the dominant/normative differentiations of time and process-product replete in conventional research talk and practice circulating in the academy are seductive, deceptive and, in many ways, deeply

problematic. By critically and reflexively exploring myself and my experiences in the field, I came to

realise that many of the well-worn and traditionally accepted categories, frames and ideas of

methodological and ethical praxis structuring conventional approaches to qualitative-interpretive

work, like ethnography, did not provide the guarantees they implicitly promised. More and more so

upon this critical realisation I felt, alike St. Pierre (1997, pp. 197, *my emphasis*), that I possessed no

desire "to produce knowledge based on these categories, *which are just words*". In fact, I began to

think of many of these categories as "simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1994/1981); things that pointed to

something which wasn't 'really there'.

Certainly, once I started fieldwork, it increasingly felt like my best and most disciplined efforts at

'knowing' in advance in the form of planning had failed (me). I felt there was a subtle and altogether

powerful discursive objectivism (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) underpinning many of these standard

approaches that appeared to correspond with more positivist conceptualisations and styles of

research conduct; or, ones that I felt clearly stood in an obvious relation to a range of more

'modernist' assumptions I specifically sought to work against. I feel I learned there was no such

"similitude of things to themselves" (Baudrillard, 1994/1981, pp. 109) through language to support

my prior methodological and ethical thinking and planning. The standard, institutionally accepted

practices of ethical research the academy proliferates and reinforces, for example, seemed to

crumble in my hands as I tried to work (with) them and, ironically, led me into some ethically

dubious situations. Then, when the standard practices and approaches offered no success, I didn't

know what to do, what to think or how to behave. I eventually reflected this was because there are

no definitively 'right' answers; no standard responses that could crosscut persons, context and

situations uniformly or unproblematically because they are not 'standard'. Postmodern and

poststructuralist ideas of complexity, uncertainty and radical unknowability I had been exposing

myself to soon became much more than abstracted philosophical postures and, rather, seemed like

vivid reflections of my experiences in the field.

In many ways, I felt it was the dominant and governmentalising rationalities of research planning and practice academia circulates that had failed me through my unavoidable performative imbrication and entangled becomings with them. The more this realisation dawned, the more I explored the interplay of my own ideas, practices and subjectivity, and the kinds of discourses which unavoidably positioned, conditioned and produced me.

Early in fieldwork, I started to recognise everything needed exposed to rigorous reflexive questioning to, I hoped, learn something from things going 'wrong' and feeling "lost" (Lather, 2007); "work the ruins" (Lather, 2011, pp. 7), as it were. I asked myself questions like 'where had *I* went wrong?', 'can I start again given I've already begun?', 'where can I find guidance on managing human relationships and ethical dilemmas when the guidance available tends to talk in terms of 'codes' and standardised practices?'

Looking back at the starting points of this reflexive engagement, I can now see I was trying to (rather blindly) 'feel my way' through this work. So, I started asking myself different kinds of questions: Are there definitive starts, ends and products of our inquiries we can define *a priori*? Is this how the (social) world works? Is this how thought works? Is this primarily how we understand our lives and experiences, and those of others? Are the objects and subjects of our inquiries existing neatly bounded in the 'real' world and knowable in advance to facilitate planning? What ontologies and/or epistemologies lead us to believe this may be so? And, what position/role do we occupy in our inquiries? How are we implicated in production rather than discovery?

It seemed most of my challenges happened in the field; in the doing*; in the middle; "*intermezzo*"* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2007, pp. 25). My feelings of disorientation, confusion, uncertainty, indeterminacy, indirection, of not knowing where to start or focus during fieldwork, or what analyses and interpretations I could or should pursue, could be read as indicative of the realisation I

found myself in the middle of things (always) already in complex, moving and dynamic relations and through my work, I fundamentally affected these assemblages. Everything, it seemed, was happening in the middle *as I made it happen*, and as it happened to me, and so, I needed to think on my feet to find my way through.

8.2.4. An Ontology of Becoming-…

I began to ask myself: How could I begin to rethink, or unthink, the dominating ideas of starts, ends and products? What might it be to re/un/think the dominant categories of conventional qualitative-interpretive research to focus instead on process, conceptualising the/a middle and what happens in the 'in-between' of our work?

Deleuze & Guattari's (1987/2007) notion of a 'microphysics of becoming' is often viewed as a response to, primarily modernist, Euro-American positivist and statist *meta*-physical (hence, 'micro-physics') assumptions about the nature of reality, being and identity. Our everyday thinking on such matters, it seems, are so deeply founded in and determined by such powerful historical meta-narratives that we can very often fail to recognise and appreciate the inherent performative unpredictability and continuously dynamic change, flux and variability of the world and ourselves. This is where my project of un/re/thinking 'began'; critically and reflexively in the middle of my failures and dilemmas.

The notion of becoming draws on Deleuze & Guattari's (*ibid*) earlier work *Anti-Oedipus* (1983/2000) and owes a significant debt to Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1968/1994, pp. 28-70) where, he argues, "difference in itself" is central to the idea of becoming. Becoming-, Stagoll (2005, pp. 26) argues, "describe[s] the continual production […] of difference immanent within the constitution of events". Becoming, then, stands in contrast to classically metaphysical, modernist and static concepts of being and identity, and the production of these 'things'. If the 'scientific' pre-occupation

with the algorithmic organisation and predictability of the world and the immediacy of presence, being and identity is what undergirds a world of representations (i.e. re-productions), then *becoming-* – specifically becoming-something else; becoming-different; becoming-*difference* – undercuts *re*presentation and moves us to inchoately new ways of being and knowing with profound implications for our notions of 'self', identity and subjectivity. Thus, through the kinds of materialist-poststructuralist ideas I have discussed here, it is possible to work against "the underlying academic ideology – that *being* a something […] is better than *becoming"* (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, pp. 967, emphasis) corresponding with the performative, neoliberal idea(l) that closures are better than openings, that answers are greater than generating (more) problems, that end products are superior to processes.

It is not a product, a *being-something,* that matters. This kind of thinking is already incorrect. Rather, it is the continuous processual component *of* becoming that matters; an endless "flux of successive becomings" (Braidotti, 2001, pp. 391) as the world and everything 'in' it is entangled and produced together. From this perspective, there can be no essentialist thinking in terms of 'pure' starts, ends or products, nor any definitively fixed and unentangled 'I' preceding the world and "intra-action" (Barad, 2007, pp. 140) with/in it. Instead, becoming invites us to think, performatively, in terms of multiplicities and assemblages, and the dynamic fluidity of continuous transformation inherent to these. Becoming, for Stagoll (2005, pp. 26), marks "the very dynamism of change" of being in "in between-ness" (Gregoriou, 2004, pp. 236). Importantly, as Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2007, pp. 293) also note, "[*t*]his is not to say that becoming represents a phase between two states, or a range of […] states through which something might pass on its journey to another state" (*ibid*). It is not point of origin or destination that matters but the journey(ing) itself; the (endless) process itself. As Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote: "…to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive…" (Stevenson, 1881, pp. 190) – and this, to me, is a fitting aphorism with which to highlight our contemporary performative and neoliberal proclivity for ends, closures, answers and products over starts,

openings, (more) uncertainty, problems and process/es, and attempt to challenge and work beyond them.

Instead of labouring under prevailing but untenable objectivist assumptions of "out-thereness" (Law, 2004), the differentiations of subject and object, and the essential 'thingness' of things (which some authors have argued still haunts much of contemporary, conventional qualitative research methodologies: *see* Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2014; Lather, 2011, 2013, 2016; MacLure, 2006), becoming operates under a processual assumption of continuous, immanent, unique production. The idea of becoming, then, prompts a reconceptualised performative perspective provoking us to consider the production of 'things' (*including ourselves – "[a] complex of men and things" (Foucault, 1991, pp. 93)*) wherein:

> "…[e]very event is *a unique production in a continual flow of changes* […] the only thing 'shared' by events is their having become different in the course of their production […] such that *each* is simultaneously start-point, end-point and mid-point of an on-going cycle of production." (Stagoll, 2005, pp. 26, *my emphasis*).

Ourselves, our thoughts, ideas and methodologic choices, etc. do not arise *ex nihilo,* and are not additively combined at the beginning or at the end of our inquiries. We cannot innocently 'begin' our research projects as if we exist before the world, or occupy a privileged position above, beyond or at some point outside it and the subjects/objects of our inquiries, by presuming they are actually definitive 'things' that exist independently, prior to our entangled "intra-actions" with/in them. We, alongside our objects and subjects, may only become 'things' at all through our "intra-actions" and subjective constructions, and these, almost invariably it seems, shift, transform and change while we work (with) them. The 'things' of our research emerge constantly and transform by working the middle working *in* the "middle-muddle" as Sellers (2015, pp. 12) puts it. Conceptualising becoming, pivoting to an understanding of process and working (in) the middle/s in these ways, far from promising definitive products, may only lead us to generate yet more of the 'middle' in an ever-

growing "network of a-centred interconnections (Morss, 2000)" (*ibid*) forming our expansive and endlessly transforming research assemblages.

Correspondingly, there are no set inputs, or methods for inputting, which can unproblematically deliver definitively pre-programmed outputs. There are no essential products, only process/es. It could be argued that if we were to 'know' what we might find before we do/try, there may be little point in doing it at all. We would only ever enter the field for some confirmations and find out what we already knew to know in advance; we would simply be *re*-producing what already 'is'.

Rather, we ought to think in these more processual terms of becoming. Becoming is the constitutive element of dynamic change, of endless cycles of production of difference, construction and reconstruction, of constantly (re)making ourselves, our work and the world in and through ongoing "intra-action" (Barad, 2007, pp. 140) and engagement with/in it. This kind of thinking, I feel, has invited me to conceive and engage with/in a/the middle and with what might happens in the 'in-between' of our research work; with what happens in my work as *I* (along with all others) make it happen.

In retrospect, it is perhaps worth highlighting that I now see the construction of this (*becoming-*)thesis assemblage has and continues to grow outward from a mass of middles in many capricious directions. For instance, I did not start writing and thinking at the start and end at the end, with no diversions or detours in-between. Instead, now, I feel I began somewhere in the middle, writing-thinking-doing, critically and reflexively working (in) the "middle-muddle" (Sellers, 2015, pp. 12) and generating yet more middle(s) to engage with in order to develop my thinking and approaches to methodology and the substantive interpretations and 'conclusions' emerging from this work – but with no certain promise or hope I would arrive, anywhere, expect for more of the middle alike Archytas' paradox.

This realisation I felt encouraged, even necessitated, a more deep-seated commitment to critical reflexivity throughout my work. I felt I needed to harness the potentially productive insights offered by reflexive engagement in order to be able to 'think against' the weight of tradition and convention, negotiate a 'new' position in a power/knowledge complex, perform a 'new' subjectivity and start to 'think on my feet' to navigate the messy "middle-muddle" (*ibid*) in which I found myself.

I asked myself: how can I re/un/think the 'traps' and 'deceptions' of normative, conventional practices of qualitative methodological and ethical praxis, negotiating their problematics in the context of their/my 'failures'? How might I proceed in more processual terms given, now, everything is "simultaneously start-point, end-point and mid-point *of an on-going cycle* of production" (Stagoll, 2005, pp. 26)? And, following Derrida's famous problematisation, what thoughts might it now be possible to think or *think otherwise*?

Essentially, these problems and provocations are some of the most elemental questions that have arisen through my work that have led me to problematise much of what I have taken for granted and engage with 'new' forms of posthuman and materialist thought/thinking. I now feel convinced the true mark and contribution of our inquiries are not the questions we presume to answer and thus close off, but rather the spiral of complications and further problematizing questions we produce which only represent temporary endpoints, constituting (new) "…opening[s]…" (Stronach & MacLure, 1997) and marking the "preceding echoes" (Sellers, 2009) of yet more (of the) middle(s) to be brought into being. The "and…and…and" of an on-going conversation to which Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2007, pp. 25) refer.

In the remaining sections, I continue to respond to some of this study's emergent problematics and questions as they relate to methodology which I see, simultaneously, as both endpoint *and* starting point.

8.2.4.1. Thinking other-wise: *What happens in the middle?*

It seems all too common in research for things to at least appear to have definitive starts and ends. Conventional thinking in the academy about research and the routinely corresponding research practices and approaches that go along with this, essentially conceive and reinforce the activity as an input-output model, simultaneously preventing competing conceptualisations from emerging as intelligible and permissible. In this neoliberal academic context, it seems research is always pre-occupied with its own end/s; its products. The middle, if it is anything at all in this conceptualisation, is simply the manifest space of the movement from predefined start to predefined end. The middle is nothing more than the means to an/the end. Notions of definitive/definable and stable beginnings and ends, in the context of research methodologies, presuppose a kind of biunivocality, linearity and stasis. To be sure, then, these same ideas naturally 'play out' and 'trap' us in our own subjectivities impacting on the enactment of our inquiries in the field. That is: when we plan our projects in such depth and with such dedication and implicit certainty, we may be beguiled to believe that if we start somewhere and follow *our own* roadmaps we will arrive at our desired destinations. Between start and end, the middle, then, is nothing more than a "striated […] space" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2007, pp. 361-362) "plotting out a closed space for linear and solid things" (*ibid*, pp. 361) through which we travel to be delivered to our pre-fixed destination. Methodology then becomes performed as (if it was) a straight line; point A to point B; *"*the smooth unfolding of an orderly structure" (Lecerle, 1990, pp. 134). For instance, the conventional practice of structuring research in plans, via GANTT charts and marking progress via prescribed 'milestones' (as is the common institutional vernacular), I had rather unquestioningly abided by, actually contains a number of problematic assumptions regarding time and knowledge construction through research which, I soon felt, required deeper exploration and interrogation.

The idea an inquiry should, and indeed *can*, be planned in its entirety prior to its inception, and that we can coherently and unproblematically enact such plans in the 'real' world, reinforces a number of dominant assumptions about the world and how we might produce knowledge of it. A fixed 'plan of attack' for a research project, when enacted with an eye on methodological "hygiene" (Law, 2004, pp. 9), supposes the social world exists "out-there" (*ibid*, pp. 6) beyond us, and that it will, more or less, stay put while we try go about our knowing work. Reality's inhering features and persons, on this assumption, would seem to be fixed like scenery and characters in a diorama that we wander through unaffected and unaffecting. What this mode(l) elides is any kind of competing articulation of the world as principally composed of continuously productive flows and fluxes of (re)production and transformation; that 'we are not always already becoming in entanglement'. Becoming, performativity, movement and transformation seem conspicuously unaccounted for in the conventional image of the world and research our normative approaches to methodology foster.

As my doctorate progressed, and my thinking began to take place within a more poststructural-materialist, perhaps "Deleuzian frame" (Mazzei & Mc Coy, 2010, pp. 504), I increasingly sought to disrupt these ideas which I felt, in very real ways, were impacting on my subjectivity, critical capacities and, therefore, my practices in the field. I sought to reorient my thinking towards an examination of the processes "that make the world" (Vieira, 2017) of this study and myself in tandem.

8.2.4.2. Becoming- reflexive; becoming-reflexivity

Increasingly coming to dispense with dominant ideas of starts and ends, answers and products, and with commensurate ideas of stable, unproblematic guiding categories of research and its conduct, conceptualisations of fixed objects and subjects in stable relations, my thinking became guided more by ideas of process, complexity, transformation, becoming and "entanglement" (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, pp. 630). But, continuing to 'worry' over how I should proceed thinking in this 'new' frame, I came to a different sort of realisation regarding the importance of reflexivity. Reflexivity, when

married with notions of process, becoming, entanglement and "intra-action", seemed to provide a way to engage in a radical re-conceptualisation and re-understanding of the research act and myself within it by working (through) my "stuck places" (Lather, 2011, pp. 482) and the embedded problematics these gestured to, in order to expand and refine my thinking and doing continuously and iteratively.

This 'new' understanding I feel I have 'arrived' at, I believe, maps onto discussions of the problematics of starts and ends, middles and process/es, becomings, entanglements and "intra-actions" that has been the critical 'theme' of this chapter. There can be no definitive ends or answers to the range of onto-epistemologic and methodologic problems I have introduced here and in the same ways there is no 'real' end to reflexivity. At least, as I see it, any means-end style thinking on or practice of reflexivity will inevitably fail and "miss its object" (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, pp. 109) because no such definitive object or 'end' exists. As Spivak (1974, pp. lxix) states of representation in her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1988), "the thing itself always escapes".

But to take reflexivity seriously, in these respects, it is worth asking a critical question: what would actually be, or do we think would be, the 'object' or 'end' of reflexive thinking? Would it be to assert our 'being there', our presence, and thus claim greater authorial or interpretive warrant? Is it to arrive at higher orders of 'truth' or produce 'better', more coherent or more developed understandings? And would this be a way of simultaneously bracketing off or 'explaining away' our situatedness and subjectivity, or our performative imbrications and entanglements? Reflexivity may be many things, but it is not a panacea. In any of these questions above, the spectral problematic of means-end styles of thought are clear; and yet, there are many examples where such logics are apparent in researchers' (mis)uses of reflexivity. And, none of this is to mention the problems of our ever-transforming subjectivities and the performative practice of 'doing reflexivity' as both agent

and target (i.e. the 'person' doing the reflexive examining is the 'person' being examined). We cannot dislocate 'self' from 'self' to stand outside our-'self' in these ways; any semblance of this would, to my mind, be an illusion of onto-epistemological contortionism. There is no such essential 'self'; as Derrida (1981a, 1981b, 2001) pointed out, the word/idea 'self' itself is an indeterminate sign for a continuously uncertain signified. And furthermore, if we take, for example, Butler's contributions to performativity seriously, we must concede that the 'self' we suppose is doing the reflexive looking does not exist before the act itself, but is fundamentally brought forth by virtue of this 'looking'. That is, the "transformative moments of thought [*whereby*] the self continually remakes itself […] as it makes its current knowledge positions and identifications permeable" (Forbes, C). While early poststructural, deconstructive and feminist critiques have problematised the notion of an essential 'self' and potentially complicated some of the connected problematics of reflexivity, as a community of scholars, it has now become a normative methodological discourse and field strategy (Sriprakash & Mukhopadhyay, 2015) – perhaps in the absence of alternatives. Davies (2018, pp. 114) argues: "New materialist thought makes a fresh challenge to the taken-for-granted ascendance of all things human in qualitative research…", and this importantly includes researcher reflexivity.

Moreover, it could be argued – again, from a more poststructural and/or posthuman, 'new' materialist understanding – that the conventional, normative approaches to reflexivity evident in much contemporary qualitative methodology involves a certain element of narcissistic individualism and containment that further risks "monumentalising […] the standpoints of 'knowers'" (Sriprakash & Mukhopadhyay, 2015, pp. 231) privileging the researcher, their ideas and perspectives, above those of the researched (Fox & Alldred, 2018). This may also partly be a by-product of the "intensification of individualism that the assemblage of neoliberalism" has given rise to (Davies, 2018, pp. 118). Importantly, "such approaches to reflexivity do not attend to the situated,

contingent, [*performative*] and relational dynamics of 'knowing' itself." (Sriprakash &

Mukhopadhyay, 2015, pp. 231).

However, I do not intend to suggest we do away with reflexivity. At any rate, at a certain point

during fieldwork, in order to assist me navigating and 'feeling my way' through, I started to engage

more critically *with*/*in* critical reflexivity, and the work of Deleuze & Guattari (1986/2007) and

others, more and more so. In the following section, I consider another provocative Deleuzo-

Guattarian imaginary of the "nomad" and reflect on this in the context of my developing subjectivity

and enhanced understandings of methodology and methodological approaches.

8.2.5. (becoming-) nomad(ic): *Indeterminacy, indirection and getting 'lost'*

Borne of reflexive critique in and out of the field, the ideas and 'categories' that, initially, structured

my methodological thinking and planning had destabilised, ruptured, exploding their hegemonic

signification alerting me to their distorting and governmentalizing effects. In particular, I started to

reflect on feeling "lost", on feelings of uncertainty, indirection, indeterminacy and the sense I wasn't

doing things 'right'. This led me to engage with the imaginary of the "nomad", or nomadism.

Patti Lather (2007) insists that we ask ourselves questions about the limits of our research practices

and the ways in which different types of knowledge are enabled, or not, by different approaches; by

our "intra-actions" and enacted "agential cuts". She insists we try to "grasp what is on the horizon in

terms of new analytics and practices of inquiry" (*ibid*, pp. 1) thereby prompting us to explore

research processes and practices that conceive of the world and its inhering phenomena as

"multiple, simultaneous and in flux" (*ibid,* pp. 4). In a way, Lather, following the likes of Derrida,

Foucault, Deleuze (& Guattari) and other 'poststructuralists', urges us to re/un/think tradition and

embrace the idea of conceptual 'play', i.e. experimentations, deconstructions and fabrications.

Derrida (1967/1997, pp. 7) describes these deconstructive ideas, related to "différance" and

conceptual 'play', as "strategic and adventurous", "blind tactics", "a strategy without finality"; a form of "empirical wandering". Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2007, pp. 351-423) may prefer the imaginary of the "nomad". Sellers (2015, pp. 11), operating in a Deleuzian frame, describes what thinking, writing and inquiring *nomadically* might look like suggesting "thoughts roam freely, wander, flow outside familiarity toward generating ever expanding territories and passages of thinking".

From such a critical reading, when adopting an ethnographic approach incorporating principles of emergent, iterative design that seek to embrace imprecision, indirection and indeterminacy, what should we make of the apparent (institutional) necessity for plans and direction? "Certainly", Hammersley & Atkinson (1983, pp. 23) write, "we must recognise that, much less than other forms of social research, the course of ethnography cannot be pre-determined". There are few riven paths for us to follow making ethnographic research much more about "discovery rather than confirmation" (Merriam, 1998, pp. 19, IN: Butvilas & Zygmantas, 2011, pp. 36); more about process than product. Rabinow, *et al.* (2008, pp. 116) argue:

> "The challenge is to become part of a foreign milieu, to submit to the outside, to get drowned in and carried away by it, while staying alert to the gradual emergence of a theme to which chance encounters, fugitive events, anecdotal observations give rise. In short, the term design emphasises the significance of long-term research, the need to be sensitive to the singularity of the field site, and the art of not letting one's research and thinking be dominated by well-established theories of what fieldwork is…"

We must "*become* part of the foreign milieu", "submit" to it, "get drowned in and carried away by it" (*ibid*) which immediately subverts the notion of being able to separate ourselves from our inquiries (i.e. to know the dancer from the dance). Likewise, the notion of getting "drowned in and carried away by" the field and our inquiries seemed to support my rethinking in terms of indeterminacy and indirection, and address some of my doubts and anxieties about 'getting it right' I felt in the field.

It seemed it was these two ideas in concert – the unstandardisable, unfinishable but productive "art" of critical reflexivity as Rabinow *et al.* (*ibid*) highlight, and the unpredictable "generative serendipity" of ethnographic inquiry Mills & Morton (2013) note – that permitted me to continue attempting to un/re/think the pernicious trappings of tradition and convention that, I felt, had been governmentalizing my thinking and doing in crucial ways. Only by reorienting my thinking toward process/es, the dancer *and* the dance, toward reflexivity, to becoming-nomad(ic), was I able to continue to reflexively explore the research act and thereby begin to learn from my seeming failures effecting "transformative moments of thought" in the "comings and goings" of this engagement "in which my provisional self-positionings and perspectives were continuously in flux and sliding away as I constructed and reconstructed new knowledge positionings and identifications" (Forbes, 2008, pp. 450, 453). For instance, I could not have predicted or planned, at the outset, for the generativity of "fugitive events" such as data 'finding' me in the field, trying and 'failing' in my analyses and writing of interpretive accounts, or even meeting Jason by chance at a conference which led to the recruitment of *Brook College,* and all of these having profound effects of my subjectivity.

Lincoln & Guba (1985, pp. 193-194), echoing Ball's (1990a) comments, state that one of the advantages of the ethnographic "human-as-instrument" lie in our capacity for thinking on our feet, for adaptation and responsiveness (perhaps our "resilience"), our ability to handle sensitive matters, to appreciate both the 'whole' and minutiae simultaneously, our ability to explore, analyse and interpret, and to do all this with a continuously reflexive processual engagement.

In short, the processes and trajectory of research cannot be standardised or predicted beforehand. No one can really tell you what to do or how to do it in advance. Mills & Morton (2013, pp. 43) say "[t]his is why setbacks are so […] often at the heart of ethnography", in that they provide us with "transformative moment[s]" (*ibid*). Certainly, for me, this project's failures were its and my most "transformative moment[s]" which led me to abandon much of my 'best laid plans' and the

categories that structured and conditioned me/them. All the planning in the world, I soon realised, could not have accounted for the transformative moments of chance, 'failure', feeling "lost" (Lather, 2007) and trying to work my way through that seemed to push me forward. I could not have understood, in the beginning, the largely indefinable, indeterminate but profoundly productive 'art' of reflexivity that would lead me to insightful places not in spite of but as a result of my failures (Anderson, 1989). In so doing, this facilitated me in engaging in reflexive thinking as a transformative, pedagogical "practice of self-formation" whereby "the self [*acts*] on the self" in an "attempt to develop and transform oneself" (Foucault, IN: Lottinger, 1989, pp. 433).

For instance, my challenging experiences writing which led to altering my perspectives and practices towards writing 'as-method' could be read as nomadic in character. I felt I, and the project, was "travelling in the thinking that writing produces" (St. Pierre, 2000b, pp. 258). Through reflexive engagement with the processes of analysis and writing, and my feelings of interpretive uncertainty and indirection, I came to see writing, methodology and myself as nomadic. And, this perspectival shift, too, seemed to address some of my doubts and fears about feeling "lost" and 'getting it right'. This nomadic approach to writing and interpreting was emimently productive precisely for its imprecision, its non-linear progressivity and its zig-zagging (*see* Deleuze & Parnet, 1987/2002) between data, conceptual framing and interpretive construction with no eye on a definitive product. I now saw writing and interpretation as nomadic. The texts I have produced, I hope, reflect their nomadic construction. My accounts are partial and messy; they are reflexive, fragmented and stuttering stories which have no essential start or end; I have tried to highlight their/my uncertainty and complexity and so provide a possibility space to continue and extend discussions of this work, beyond this work. In this sense, my work here represents a 'moment'; a 'preceding echo' of an on-going and perpetually incomplete conversation. Sellers (2015, pp. 12, *my emphasis*) remarks:

> "Nomad thinking works with/through interrelationships of text, topic and writer
> (Richardson, 2000b). In the inquiry of thinking~reading~writing, St.Pierre (2000b)

understands this as (re)turning to spaces already worked – mental spaces, textual

spaces and theoretical spaces – in itself challenging as such spaces are inevitably

constantly changing. *However, continually (re)visiting and (re)turning to spaces*

of/within ideas becomes a way of opening (to) hitherto unnoticed possibilities. Any

concluding thoughts then become but a preface for negotiating more (of the)

(e)merging middle(s)"

My vexing and uncertain back-and-forth experiences in writing, which at first I understood as a

personal failure to do justice to my own thinking, were indicative of my need to '(re)visit and

(re)turn' to my own ideas I naively presumed were 'complete'. In doing so, I was indeed 'opened up'

to many "hitherto unnoticed possibilities" though, more importantly, I realised there was/is no 'real'

endpoint. There is no such thing as 'complete' which could allow me to write representational

accounts of my analysis unproblematically. Rather, writing was/is *a part* of the research, not apart

from it; not an endpoint where we fix things in text; it is an fundamentally constitutive *part* of our

methods of analysis and interpretation, and our encompassing research assemblages. We cannot

know where we will be taken "in the thinking that writing produces" (St. Pierre, 2006, pp. 258) until

we write, making 'getting lost' an entirely productive 'deviation'. It seems that deliberately

harnessing mess, indeterminacy and imprecision are, oddly, presicely the things which direct us and

lead us to important interpretive places and enhanced understandings nontheless making us

question plans and products. Inquiring, thinking, writing nomadically, then, becomes a way to free

ourselves from the dominating ideas that *there is* a story to tell, that there *is* a 'right' way or a

singular product, that the processes of analysis and interpretation can ever be 'complete', that

writing is about representing prior observations or thought, that our seeming failures are really

'failures' at all and not "openings" (Stronach & MacLure, 2007), moments of/for transformation we

should grab with both hands. As Richardson & St.Pierre (2005, pp. 963) say, the odd 'truth' of

research, of writing is that "[p]aradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously,

we know there is always more to know."

8.3. Endpoints (3): *'Personal' Reflections*

8.3.1. Process and 'substance'

This PhD always felt like a somewhat strange encounter in many respects, but one in particular –

researching education as a student and subject (a 'student') of education myself. I was exploring

issues regarding neoliberalism and performativity in the context of 6th form students completing

their A-level studies and progressing into HE that were, in many respects, the same discourses and

social forces that seemed to position and impact me in similar ways. In this brief concluding section,

then, I take the unique critical and reflexive opportunity afforded by this Doctorate to reflect on the

parallels between aspects of the interpretive 'substance' of this thesis and my reflections on the

nature and context of its conduct.

8.3.1.1. 'Ontologic insecurity'

Ball's (2003, pp. 220) idea of 'ontologic insecurity' is one I have grappled with throughout crafting

this thesis, and as such, I have had a good deal of time to think (about) it. For a considerable period,

however, I understood this idea only in relation to the data I collected in *Brook College.* However,

towards the closing stages of writing, and when feel I started to even more deeply reflexively

explore my own thoughts and feelings coming to the 'end' of the study, I began to think idea in a

different way, in a different context. I began to think about how 'ontologic insecurity' may offer

theoretical and philosophical insights and at least partial explanations of how I felt throughout

conducting this research and with it, my experiences of starting to become an academic 'proper' as

it were. And then, I started to think about how these ideas and reflections may have played out in

me and impacted this research in similar ways as I felt they did in *Brook College*.

Reading my own work now, I can see how it reflects a researcher repeatedly at pains with himself

and his research conduct as a consequence of a powerful idea about the 'right' way or a 'correct' set

of procedures or outcomes from this study. This, I want to suggest, was more than an appropriate

desire to do a 'good job' as a novice researcher, to achieve a Ph.D. As the early chapters of this

thesis, I feel, make abundantly clear I often felt like I had 'failed' in the field, and then, later, I felt I had continued and 'failed' again in respect of my thinking, analysis and writing after continually feeling 'lost' and like I wasn't doing things 'right'.

Those feelings of insufficiency, of indeterminacy and indirection, of being "lost" as Lather (2007) puts it, which still very much pervade me, resulted in constant insecurities and 'imposter' feelings. I felt like I didn't 'measure up' and always had to do more and *more again* to try and mitigate those feelings. However, doing more didn't seem to provide relief and this is what led me back to reflect on Ball's notion of ontologic insecurity in the context of my own experiences conducting this work.

I feel I observed this form of performative insecurity and anxiety among students at *Brook College* – and to a certain extent, I observed examples of it in Pastoral Mentors' talk regarding their yearly performance management reviews (PMRs) and the continuous electronic 'tracking' of their work forming a complex of technologies of accountability and performance management. However, the most illuminative example of this profound neoliberal-performative force or effect, in relation to *Brook* students, was in the various reflexive technologies of "self-review" I observed. As described previously, these technologies served to instrumentalise reflexivity for self-improvement in a permanent feedback loop. One of the most profound effects of these quantitatively inflected, formative audit procedures and technologies when their rationalities are already built on a range of assumed deficits, is in positioning individuals to understand that there is *always* more they could and should be doing to better themselves. In turn, this becomes a relentless performative ethic and regime of the self. Fundamentally, these responsibilising technologies of the self operate on an insufficiency model by guiding students to recognise what they're *not doing* (enough of). And furthermore, since success is all there is in neoliberalism, and since individuals must produce *their own* success(es) constantly, what results is a profound sense of existential insecurity leading students to reflect once again on what they're not doing (enough of), *ad infinitum*.

As an ethnographer, reflexivity always played an important role in this research and, as I hope my methodological reflections show, this importance became more and more acute as I engaged with/in it and the problematics of this work. I attempted to harness the productive insights critical reflexivity afforded me to help me work (through) my 'failures' and "stuck places". In other words, I tried to expand my thinking and doing in positive ways through critically reflexive engagement with myself and my own problems. However, it may have been the case that I was not appropriately critical *about* critical reflexivity itself. Thinking and looking back now, I think my reflexive engagement with/in this work is precisely where my feelings of insecurity, indirection, uncertainty and being "lost" emerged and peaked.

A continuous commitment to reflexivity is not, in itself, a bad thing of course. However, it is a highly challenging idea and even more difficult practice (or form of praxis) because it suggests endless insufficient iterations of everything one thinks/writes/believes. Haynes (2011, pp. 143) articulates this challenge well: "...self-questioning and exploration of the self is emotionally difficult. It can leave the researcher feeling exposed and vulnerable, empowered and elated, a whole host of emotional responses, alternately, simultaneously, concurrently." When we reflexively examine ourselves, our ideas, practices, beliefs, attitudes, opinions and whatever else in these ways, we essentially expose ourselves to critical questioning trying to identify our subjective 'blind spots' or where and how, based on which ideas and assumptions, we may be getting 'trapped' in our own subjectivities. This, to me, necessarily involves asking ourselves some very challenging and often uncomfortable questions that indeed threaten to 'expose' us in certain ways, and that may result not in answers and directions, but in more problems that are likely not easily resolved or easily translate into action.

I believe critical reflexivity was particularly challenging for me because of my position as a doctoral student of education conducting my PhD *in* the performative space of the neoliberal university with its prevailing discourses of managerialism and (personal-ised) accountability, combined with a very sharp personal sense of the perceived intellectual and practical expectations *of* doctoral students (as

neophyte academics). It seemed my subjectivity and, as such, my critically reflexive self-awareness was always deeply entangled with and anchored by these dominant performative discourses and structures despite my desire to identify and challenge them. So although I felt like *I knew* (on one level at least) that ideas that there is *a* 'right way' were governmentalizing illusions, it was simultaneously very difficult to 'catch' when these styles of thought were subtly colonising my thinking and guiding my practices. This is because the discourses of neoliberalism and performativity are pervasive structuring and conditioning forces. To borrow Ball & Olmedo's (2013, pp. 88) use of Peck & Tickell's (2002) phrase, performativity is both 'out there' *and* 'in here'. The reach, and powerful effects, of these discourses are not localised/localisable to only 'here' or 'there', 'them' but not 'me'. Because they are so deeply embedded in everyday life, they are quiet and difficult to apprehend. They are the dominant discursive regimes and rationalities that fundamentally structure the social, define our social practices and that position, produce and 'speak' *us all* in principally the same ways, with similar effects. In this sense, I am ostensibly no different to the students in my study.

My productive (mis)adventures in writing is an illustrative example of my feelings of ontologic insecurity, and its effects on me and my research practice. For instance, reflecting now on my experiences, I can see that I was being led by 'product'-style thinking. My doubts, uncertainties and insecurities about what and how to write, I feel, stemmed from dominant and oppressive ideas regarding a correct 'product' I thought I was supposed to be producing. Curiously, though, while these feelings were strong, I was never sure what that 'product' *was* – because there wasn't one.

This is, I think, because the dominant discourses do just that, *they dominate*; they oppress, repress, suppress and governmentalize our thinking by superimposing their logics and rationalities on our own subjectivities such that we take them to be matters of our own mind or will. They are normative in the sense that they construct and reinforce specific norms relative to which each and all must organise and understand themselves and their actions; and so too in this sense, (dominant)

discourses are performative and constitutive in the sense of producing us as certain kinds of subjects imbued with specific styles of thought/thinking and ways of acting corresponding with their rationalities and regimes of truth. Thus, whether on an explicit level we seek to resist and subvert dominant and oppressive discursive regimes and articulations or not, we cannot 'escape' them; they are always 'in here' as much as 'out there'. We are always-already unavoidably produced, positioned and affected by them, often perhaps in ways altogether unknown to us, such that we inadvertently enact them and collude in our own governmentalizing illusions.

This brings me full circle back to reflexivity. Now, while for me reflexivity became a highly liberating albeit routinely challenging process and research 'tool' that helped me explore, understand and challenge my feelings of performative insecurity and anxiety, this was not the case for *Brook College* students as I understood it. For those young people, the self-directed, critical consciousness raising practice of reflexivity had been restructured, redefined and instrumentalised through the dominant rationalities of neoliberal-performative discourses of education. Reflexive self-awareness and critical capacity to act and transform oneself and one's environment, for *Brook* students, was turned into a mechanistic 'means-end' exercise directed solely towards the goal of educational performance and achievement. We can see this in the terms by which this 'reflexivity' proceeded; pre-specified through dominant constructions of the assumed subjects (i.e. 'good' students; "superstars") and activities to be examined, and their already assumed nature and purpose in the (reconstructed) neoliberal-performative educational process. By their very engagement and practice of these self-reflective activities and reflexive technologies of the self, students performed education in reinforcing ways and in turn, iteratively produced and performed themselves as students that corresponded with the dominant rationalities and constructions.

In this way, one of the most significant faculties by which students could critically explore and reflect on themselves, their learning and the social factors structuring these ideas to learn and enhance their critical consciousness to resist dominant, oppressive social forces, discourses and structures,

had been colonised by the utilitarian rationality and 'product' logic of performativity. I felt that the students, much like myself, were being produced in specific ways and ended up 'trapped' in their own subjectivities; trapped by dominant discourses and performances that prevented other ways of thinking and acting that did not correspond with the logic of performative utilitarianism. Both myself and my student participants – and *Brook College* staff – were being affected by the same types of dominant discourses, in different contexts but in principally the same ways and with similar effects.

I think it is important to examine these and other unavoidable imbrications, entanglements and positionings that emerge and oscillate between researcher and researched, and the interpretive 'substance' and process/practice context of our inquiries' conduct. In much the same way as I believe it is futile to try to separate the dancer from the dance, it is problematic to think that we, as researchers, are not fundamentally exposed to and affected by the same dominant discourses and social forces as the people of our research; "…detachment [*of this kind*] is never possible […] At best, [*it is*] a self-delusion" (Law, 2004, pp. 68). This would be the 'God trick', as Law (ibid) phrases it, that presumes to see "everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1991, pp. 189) and that one is able to remain uncontaminated and unaffected through their being above, beyond or outside the world of their research.

8.3.1.2. Performativity everywhere!

Two of the fundamental theoretical issues this doctorate highlights and examines, I believe, are the (twinned?) concepts of neoliberal governmentality and performativity. Once again I see parallels between my own experiences in HE, as a doctoral student, and my experiences of carrying out research at *Brook College.*

Firstly, I felt I observed convergences between the experience of navigating methodological and ethical approval from the University and negotiating access to, and formal consent from, *Brook*

College. LJMU's ethics committee, I believe, were engaged in practices of risk management in their evaluations of my initial plans and their feedback which was both methodological and (pseudo)ethical. This, I believe, is connected to forms of New Public Management across HE, which are informed by neoliberal, performative and risk-averse mechanisms incorporated into research governance procedures (Emmerich, 2013; Halse, 2011; McAreavey & Muir, 2011; O'Reilly, *et al.,* 2009; see also Haggerty's (2004) 'Ethics creep'). As I have previously described, I believe this contributed to a governmentalisation of my thinking and practice in these areas, and it took a long time for me to perceive this and, subsequently, try to work against it. This was because the requirements of the methodologic and ethical approval committees were discursively defined in relation to the dominant categories of neo-positivism and quantitative research and as such, in appropriate as they may have been to a qualitative-interpretive ethnographer, I was *required* abide the procedures and incorporate their feedback. This, then, I feel impacted on my qualitative-interpretive subjectivity, sensibilities and my sense of how I should engage in certain methods and field practices. For instance, initially, some rather 'common' ethnographic ideas and practices seemed to cause particular concern for the ethics committee (and for *Brook College*), I feel, because of their necessary and essential imprecision, indirection, indeterminacy and uncertainty, such as the concept of emergent design and iterative reflexive data collection and analysis – things that, by their very nature, cannot be prespecified to meet the needs of institutional committees or to satisfy *complete* informing during access negotiations.

And again, in *Brook College,* I felt I experienced similar things, albeit in different ways. As described, securing access to and consent from *Brook College* was a long, challenging back-and-forth series of slippery negotiations. It seemed at every turn that the college wanted greater and greater certainty and precision than I could offer given my methodological approaches and onto-epistemologic positions and perspectives; in short, ambiguity and uncertainty of both means and end/s appeared intolerable for the college in much the same way as it had been for the ethics committee. Importantly, and bringing the effects of performativity sharply into focus, the college wanted to

know at the outset *exactly* what the 'objects' of the research were, what exactly I intended on 'finding out', how exactly I intended on 'finding it out' and what was 'in it' for them. This exposes, again, a clearly neo-positivistic or quantitative conceptual understanding of research led by hypotheses and statistical testing following the logic of confirmation (or maybe given the use of null hypotheses, *falsification*) in order to provide firm conclusions so as to be able to offer the college recommendations for practice ("AFIs").

I got the impression that senior figures at *Brook College*, and other members of staff, felt that research should have clearly defined hypotheses and therefore, have specifically defined knowledge 'outcomes' in mind, combined with equally well-defined methodologic procedures. I felt these were the same kinds of dominant conceptions of research and knowledge production, and the same kind of means-end, product-oriented discourses/thinking that structured LJMU's ethical approval procedures, their evaluation of my plans and their feedback. In many ways, this is no surprise given that teaching staff – both in formal schooling and at university – are themselves continually exposed to discourses which suggest that teaching is about measurable 'outcomes' and that they should focus on 'what works' (Hargreaves, 1996, 1997, 1999*a*, 1999*b; see also* Hammersely, 2000; Atkinson, 2000) and 'evidence based practice' (Biesta, 2007; *see also* Hammersley, 2007; Davies, 2003) and that they derive this instrumental knowledge from research activities.

More obviously, this is explicitly evident in the Vice Principal's e-mail comments upon approving institutional access and consent when she said she would eagerly anticipate the 'findings' of my work and if I identified any "AFIs" (*Areas for Improvement*) – showing, from an early stage, how the college already had an eye on the 'outcomes' and the assumed instrumentality of my work for their own gain. So, too, LJMU's methodological and ethical approval procedures ask similar kinds of questions by requiring researchers consider and articulate the proposed, supposed or potential 'contributions' of our work; that is, its instrumentality; its use-value or perhaps 'impact'. This again is another example of a neo-positivistic or quantitative conception and product-oriented style of

thought about research, it's 'products' and purposes. It was no accident, then, that in my ethical application I framed this study's 'contributions' both in terms of adding to an existing body of academic scholarship and ongoing research projects in LJMU, but also framed the study's possible 'findings' in terms of its potential to benefit LJMU on an institutional level in the context of marketing and student recruitment. While I would reflect on this move now and (wish to) see it as a subversively resistant act of tacit acquiesce, or cynical compliance, it would seem that I was, in effect, performing in a certain way and producing myself as the 'good' or 'deferent' PhD student willing and able to meet such 'inappropriate' demands and imperatives to 'play the game'.

And so too, as shown, the same means-end, product-oriented styles of thought were evident in the views and pedagogical practices of college staff as well as in students thinking about and conduct of their learning and about the nature, value and purpose of HE as highlighted in *Endpoints (1)*.

8.3.1.3. Becoming (an) Academic: *'Personal' reflections*

Before bringing this chapter to an 'end' I would like to take some time to reflect on my feelings and experiences of completing this doctorate and 'becoming an academic'. In this effort, I want to focus particularly on the intersection of a range of discourses, practices and effects related to neoliberalism, performativity, new public management/managerialism and audit cultures in the context of doctoral study on myself and my (developing) academic subjectivity.

I want to explore two separates but connected issues, aspects of which I have already discussed. Firstly, I want to reflect on the performativities involved in becoming an academic – that is, the performative-discursive constitution, regulation and recognition of the 'doctoral-academic' subject – through exploring the dominant rationalities of knowledge production and the completion of a doctorate in the neoliberal academy, and latterly, within the broader context of the knowledge economy. Then, secondly, I explore some of the more 'personal', experiential, existential and embodied effects of these performative discourses, practices and cultures as they relate to my own

feelings of 'ontologic insecurity', inferiority, inadequacy, "shame" (Hoggett, 2017), anxiety and 'imposter phenomenon'. Primarily, I want to try to situate these reflections within wider debates about the culture of contemporary doctoral education as it relates to rising mental health/wellbeing concerns among doctoral students and examine the kinds of 'solutions' suggested in empirical literature. Finally, I try to connect these reflexive analyses with aspects of the substantive, interpretive ideas I have offered regarding *Brook College* and its students in my own work.

While these will be deeply personal reflections, as Bansel (2011, pp. 546) emphasises, "'personal experience' is more than personal, and more than individual." While they are personal to me, here, I believe they will also resonate with the thoughts, feelings and experiences of many others in similar positions to myself.

Bansel (2011) explores "becoming academic" through his own experiences of doctoral candidacy in particular focusing on the performative, neoliberal rationalities and practices operating in this context, including how these have impacted discourses of academic labour and the possibilities of/for doctoral-academic subjectivities. His critique responds to what he understands as the "increasingly narrow utilitarian and economistic" (Lee, Brennan & Green, 2009, pp. 276) accounts of doctoral study, doctoral-academic subjectivities and the assumed 'outcomes' of a PhD. Bansel argues that doctoral study and its 'outcomes' are (now) predominantly defined and measured relative to economistic metrics and indicators, such as the acquisition and development of specialist, transferrable skills and the production of intellectual 'products' that an assumed value in the 'knowledge economy' (*see* Matas, 2012). Bansel goes on to argue that the reconstitution of doctoral study in these ways – as opposed to a PhD essentially being understood as an educational, knowledge-producing project rather than 'training' – comes as a result of the neoliberal "conflation of epistemology and economics" (*ibid*, pp. 547).

Of course, this 'conflation' is implicit rationality of the 'knowledge economy' itself and is further connected to ideas, in academia, of researchers as 'knowledge workers' and research outputs as 'commodities' that appear to constitute a key part of "knowledge capitalism" (Peters, 2008); or more specifically for HE, "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Rhodes & Garrick (2002, pp. 91) highlight the range of economistic metaphors used in these discourses – such as 'knowledge workers', 'working knowledge', 'intellectual capital' or '…property', 'knowledge assets' – that perform a "powerful linguistic substitution" aligning the world of enterprise and capital with the domain of knowledge (production).

Fundamentally, these discourses come to define (the production of) academic knowledge in exclusively economic terms. In terms of the constitution and regulation of the doctoral-academic subject, then, these same discourses also come to define the individual, and their value, in terms of intellectual capacity, productivity and the instrumentality/applicability of their research 'products'. The doctoral-academic subject, then, becomes an economic subject through the value placed on knowledge production and those who produce it within the rationality of the knowledge economy. The academic subject *and* their academic productions therefore become commodified.

As I see it this comfortably aligns with the figure of the 'enterprising (academic) self' – *as consumers and producers of knowledge 'commodities'* – that is also deeply connected to the governmental rationalities of neoliberalism regarding nation building, innovation, progress and the importance of human capital (development) for this. Likewise, in our postmodern society as Gibbons, *et al.* (1994) and Nowotny & Scott (2002) note following Lyotard (1984), globalisation and the 'knowledge economy' *together* have brought about significant changes in the status, role and purpose of research knowledge and knowledge producers as the global knowledge economy becomes ever more reliant on a steady stream of 'new' knowledge inputs and knowledge workers as the spur to sustaining economic growth and competitiveness. In the context of HE, doctoral study and students,

there are numerous problematics that follow on from this.

First, when knowledge is a 'thing' – an object, something we 'possess' that can be manipulated, applied and deployed at will – this reinforces classical humanist notions of the knowing-subject at the centre of all things, above and beyond 'nature' exerting their dominance and mastery. As I hope I have shown in my previous methodological discussions, this position is deeply problematic (*see also* Barnacle, 2005). However, this discourse facilitates the reconstruction of research in terms of its outputs; as the generation of 'products' rather than a process of learning.

Secondly, as noted above, the nature, status and purpose of knowledge has fundamentally changed in our postmodern society. Necessarily, then, the nature of a doctorate/doctoral research and doctoral students are also fundamentally altered – shifting from their conception as an educational process and a generator of/contributor to disciplinary knowledge respectively, to producers of knowledge 'commodities'. Taken seriously, this begs important questions about what (we think) doctoral study 'is', who researches, what, how and why, and what the 'outcomes' could or should be? Barnacle (2005, pp. 181, *my emphasis*) notes that, in Australia, serious aspersions have been cast on these dominant conceptualisations of doctoral study, citing a report by Kemp (1999). She states:

> "What this assumes, of course, is that the research education experience is in fact conducive to the production of new knowledge commodities and knowledge workers. Recent policy announcements in Australia reflect the fact that the Government, for its part, is unconvinced in this regard. The discussion paper *New knowledge, new opportunities* (Kemp, 1999) claimed that Australian research degree candidates were indeed ill-equipped for a knowledge economy, lacking the breadth of knowledge, skills, and familiarity with industry, etc., to effectively take on such a role. Subsequent policy has re-affirmed this position by announcing the need for a reduction in the number of research 'training' places in Australian Universities. […] The irony of the current situation, however, is that while the innovation agenda might have been considered to ostensibly herald a boom time for research degrees,

the reality is the opposite. *Instead, a crisis exists in regard to what the Doctorate is meant to be*."

While in the Australian context, at least, the dominant understandings of "what the Doctorate is meant to be" are now being discussed more critically and expansively, I fear that this may only become a 'new' spur to greater marketised reforms where universities (as 'providers') will face greater competitive pressures to, first, retain their "research 'training' places", and secondly, attract doctoral candidates and consequently *prove* the 'value' they add to graduates entering the knowledge economy, in those same problematic economistic terms.

We can perhaps see direct examples of this reconceptualization of the 'outcomes' of doctoral study and students as 'commodities' and 'knowledge workers' first-hand in contemporary HE. It is evident in the fact that many universities now claim exclusive ownership of the intellectual property of their academics' and doctoral students' scholarly productions – perhaps especially so in the biomedical/biochemical sciences, information technology and engineering domains, for example, that may have a more direct or immediate financial value for institutions. Another example impacting experienced academics more so than doctoral students, is the need for researchers to be 'entrepreneurial' as a result of expectations that they make funding bids to secure, preferably large, research grants – many of which include monies to fund PhD scholarships, like my own. Another example, more specific to doctoral candidates, is the need for early career researchers approaching graduation, under pressure to secure post-doctoral employment, to also be entrepreneurial by focusing on their employability and by publishing at exceedingly high rates (*see* Caretta, *et al.,* 2018) and explicitly considering the 'impact' or 'REF-ness' of their work (*see* Breeze, 2018). This latter expectation, then, also has a secondary value for institutions relative to attracting new students, recruiting academic staff as well as securing funding bids and other performance-related resource allocations.

Third, most importantly, these discourses are performative; they generate significant effects on the production, constitution, regulation, recognition and experiences of the doctoral-academic subject.

For instance, the prevailing figure of the 'enterprising doctoral subject' is constituted, regulated, performed and thus, reinforced by a series of institutional expectations that, for instance, throughout our studies we engage in training to develop our expertise and marketable skills, that we seize opportunities to market ourselves and develop our public research 'profiles' by publishing papers and speaking at conferences (preferably international ones) to competitively position ourselves in post-doctoral employment; even that we all now must have professional social media accounts to achieve these ends – and that we do this all ourselves, for ourselves.

In other words, the neoliberal doctoral-academic subject is constituted and constitutes itself through a range of practices, behaviours and performances based on embedded cultural norms, expectations and responsibilities of entrepreneurialism in doctoral study. In fact I would argue that many (*if not all*) of our academic labours – as doctoral students – constitute repetitive, stylised performances of a dominant neoliberal discourses of academic-*ness* we are required to embody to be(come) visible and recognisable to others within the academic milieu, and as such, become valid and valued. As Green (2005) shrewdly points out, in this sense, the doctorate is as much about subject formation as it is about knowledge production. As doctoral students seeking to become (recognised as) academics 'proper', then, we take up a range of governmental technologies *as* technologies of the self, often in contradictory and rivalrous ways, but through which we are formed and form ourselves by the performative enactment (and their recognition in others) of visible, intelligible and valid performances of academic-*ness*.

But, what if, as critical would-be scholars, we refuse these discourses and the subjectivities they demand (and deny)? What if we do not agree with our subjection as 'knowledge workers' and 'nation builders' cut in the neoliberal image? What if we do not understand ourselves and our work as 'commodities'? Barnacle's (2005, pp. 181) thoughts are helpful here:

> "*How research candidates are situated by prevailing discourses may not be*
> *consistent with the way they see themselves*—particularly since the university (at
> least under its traditional guise) is itself a site in which a multiplicity of discourses vie

for attention and are routinely contested. Readings, for example, describes the May 1968 'campus radicals' as resisting 'the imposition of an analogy between the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities, and the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge' (1996, p. 146*). My own, anecdotal, inquiries suggest that many contemporary research candidates are equally resistant to such moves.*" (*my emphasis*)

I would count myself among this group of contemporary doctoral students who are increasingly frustrated by/with, cynical, apathetic and 'resistant' to the (re)constructions of ourselves and our work in these economic and, what I consider, 'dehumanising' ways. I hope this has been clear throughout this thesis. However, as noted in the beginning of this chapter, we must be cautious: performativity is everywhere, both 'out there' *and* 'in here', and as much as we might disagree and resist, we cannot truly escape it. Bansel (2011) provides an interesting way of understanding this 'tension' through the notion of 'ambivalence'; that is, the production of ambivalent knowledge and ambivalent subject positionings through reflections on doctoral study and academic labour.

Bansel (*ibid*, pp. 543, *my emphasis*) addresses "the micro-practices" through which himself "as doctoral candidate and knowledge worker, understands his academic subjectivity to have been constituted and lived" arguing for "resistance to the reduction of the outcomes of candidature to metrics and economic indicators" suggesting, fundamentally, "*this resistance produces a necessary ambivalence* about [*academic-ness and*] academic labour in the enterprise university." Bansel suggests that ambivalence was produced in and through his experiences of doctoral labour and through the reflexive writing practices by which that ambivalence was apprehended and articulated. The ambivalence he refers to, as I understand it, is the tension between an impression of his subjectification in the neoliberal "enterprise university" *and* an awareness of the performative, discursive practices by which that subject is/was constituted and performed:

> "…I position 'ambivalence' as more than an individual psychological state (or pathology […]. Rather, I am interested in an iteration of ambivalence as the

performative force of a relation between the subject and the practices through which that subject is constituted and regulated, made visible and intelligible. *Ambivalence is, then, understood as produced in and by the very practices through which becoming academic is constituted, authorised, regulated and performed*." (pp. 544, *my emphasis*)

Bansel discusses a range of repetitive and *simultaneous* performative acts of 'resistance' and 'capitulation', specifically with regards to neoliberal technologies of audit and accountability – such as the production of "a regulated academic product (i.e. a peer-reviewed publication)" (*ibid*) making him "*accountable* to the matrices of intelligibility through […] performance as a recognisable and credible academic subject/author" (*ibid*) – and, academic technologies of the self by which his subjectivity was constituted and performed.

Interestingly, Bansel also incorporates the accounts of other doctoral candidates to articulate the various resistant-acquiescent 'tensions' students routinely encounter and must manage and latterly, the paradoxical power/knowledge positions they may find themselves as a result. He says of *Kay*'s account:

> "Interestingly, in reflecting on Kay's account of candidature in my field notes, I constituted myself as lacking, or as a failing academic subject, because I did not experience [*her*] [*sic*] construction of passion in relation to work, knowledge or academic life. Paradoxically, I simultaneously resisted an iteration of academic subjectivity and inscribed and compared myself to it. This simultaneous inscription and resistance is experienced as ambivalence and performed as an ambivalent struggle to become academic […] This ambivalent relation produces an experience of ambivalence that is lived simultaneously as resistance *and* capitulation. […] In this sense I am also rearticulating my ambivalence as resistance rather than as a failure to become properly academic." (pp. 551-552, *emphasis in original*)

Bansel's seeming 'failure' to recognise Kay's traits in himself alongside his resistance to this identification but combined with a comparative inscription of himself relative to that performance,

i.e. his simultaneous resistance and capitulation, produced ambivalence. This, as I understand it, is provocative example of how performativity is both 'in here' and 'out there'; both something we can recognise in ourselves and others and resist, but that are also the hegemonic signifying terms by which each and all are forced to inscribe and perform themselves against. Concluding, Bansel notes:

> "It is this nexus between the personal and the political, technologies of government and of self, between the epistemological and the economic […]. *Within these tensions a variety of positions, including despondency, resistance, pleasure, failure, passion, attachment, investment and success are produced. Further, these positions are not mutually exclusive, but occur in different combinations at different times*. It is, I suggest, in and from this paradoxical, contradictory simultaneity that ambivalence is produced. Rather than see this as a disastrous failure of the self, I suggest that it is produced and embodied from within the multiple tensions..." (pp. 553, *my emphasis*)

To me, there is something in Bansel's notion of "contradictory simultaneity" and ambivalence that resonates with Ball's (2003, pp. 221-222) idea of "values schizophrenia" evident in teachers attempts to reconcile tensions across their identities, beliefs about learning and teaching practice as a result of an ambivalent positioning by the competing rationalities and value(s) of performativity and what education 'is' (or should be).

Connecting to my own work, Bansel also articulates his embodied 'ambivalence' based on the substantive issues he dealt with in his own research "concerned with […] the impacts of neoliberal practices of government on the fields of work, subjectivity and experience" (pp. 544) stressing that this ambivalence was "the embodiment of a set of knowledges that are often in tension with each other." (pp. 549).

In this sense, alike myself, one of Bansel's central objectives is to articulate, reflexively in terms of his own work, "what I have done with […] knowledge, and […] what that knowledge has done to me" (pp. 549). He argues: "…knowledge can […] be dangerous, unsettling, anxiety provoking or, as I emphasise here, a source of ambivalence". For me, the knowledge and understandings I have

generated here with regards to performativity in the context of *Brook* students completing their A-Levels and progressing into university also stimulated deeper reflections on performativity in the context of my own experiences of doctoral study and becoming an academic. That is, these understandings did something "to me"; they forced me to look, in different ways, more critically at myself, my research, my education, doctoral study, academic labour and the academy allowing me to negotiate a 'new' power/knowledge position and perform a 'new' subjectivity. Mantai (2017, pp. 636, *my emphasis*) assents this arguing that what it means to do research and how to perform as a researcher is a "profound learning experience and *is likely to transform the individual* (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010)."

Now, though, I want to pivot and discuss what I see – and have experienced – as the more malign side-effects of intensifying discourses and practices of neoliberalism, performativity and new managerialist audit cultures on doctoral study and students, especially as they relate to rising mental health and wellbeing concerns among this group. In the above sections, I explored how doctoral students (as becoming academics) are constructed and positioned by the dominant contexts, discourses and practices circulating in academia regarding academic productions and academic-*ness* in doctoral study. What this speaks to is *who* doctoral students 'are'; who they need to be or must become to become visible, recognisable and valued as valid academic subjects in this context.

Caretta, *et al.* (2018) ask *Who can play this game?* and focuses on the lived experiences of female doctoral candidates and early career researchers in the context of a greater intensification of academic labour in the neoliberal university considered a 'symptom' of the wider neoliberal agenda. Among the symptomatic effects of this neoliberal intensification, the authors note, are: prevailing entrepreneurial/ist imperatives, "market-first ideologies", encouragement of corporate-like competitive cultures among institutions and students, the "increasing precariousness" of post-

doctoral life and employment possibilities, the intensification of doctoral students' day-to-day workloads and publishing expectations, more complete accountability, performance tracking and management systems and cultures of "managerialism" (pp. 261) (*see also* Maysa & Smith, 2009; Kurtz-Costes, Helmke & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Huisman, de Weert & Bartelse, 2002). Given the authors' experiences, they also stress that these intensifying pressures unevenly impact some more than others, such as women, those from 'working class' socio-economic backgrounds, and 'international', non-White, non-English speaking students. They argue that this simply reinscribes the privileged position of those who already have "a feel for the game" (Reay, 2004, pp. 34) (*see* Joseph, 2014; Martínez Alemán, 2014; Davies & Petersen, 2005). Caretta, *et al.* cite Thwaites & Pressland (2017, pp. 24, emphasis in original) as the impetus for their paper, who note:

> "The neoliberalisation of academia demand[s] [*sic*] a particular kind of academic subject and particular temporality: self-motivated, enterprising, highly-productive, competitive, always-available, and able to withstand precarity. But *who* is this ideal academic? *Who* can – and indeed wants to – play *this* game? For those at the start of their career such questions have particular pertinence."

Of course, these are, in part, the "questions" I am grappling with here.

I believe Thwaites & Pressland's comments align with Keddie's (2016, pp. 119) work cited earlier regarding how performativity 'plays out' in contemporary students who better 'fit the coordinates' of neoliberal performativity because they adopt technologies of governance *as* (entrepreneurial) technologies of the self in order to "militate against complacency, revere competitiveness, tolerate precarity and evince flexibility" (Wilkins, 2012, p. 207). Extending these reflections, Pitt & Mewburn (2016, pp. 99) suggest that today's doctoral students are expected to show near "super-hero qualities" by being "multi-talented, always ready and available […] [*and*] capable of being everything to everyone…"; linking up with Bansel's (2018) idea 'enterprising doctoral subject'. Caretta, *et al.* (2018, pp. 272) argue that "[t]he expectations of ECRs are multiple" where "[t]hese competing

demands and the burden of them weigh heavily on even the most energetic postgraduate student and postdocs."

There is now a wealth of scholarship regarding the effects of neoliberalism and intensifying cultures of performativity in HE, especially with regards to doctoral study/students. In particular, recent studies have highlighted the more serious problematic effects of the "competing demands" of doctoral students and study – such as stress, shame and guilt, poor physical, mental and emotional health, burnout and exhaustion, and 'imposter' feelings (Cornwall, *et al.*, 2019; Waight & Giordano, 2018; Barry, *et al.*, 2018; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Hogget, 2017; Mullings, Peake, & Parizeau, 2016; Sohn, 2016; Gill, 2012; Pyhältö, *et al.*, 2012; Bates & Goff, 2012). Awareness of these effects has led some in response to emphasise developing academic cultures, systems, practices and pedagogies pertaining to doctoral study that are more conducive to an explicit focus on mental health and wellbeing by cultivating an "ethic of wellness" (Mullings, *et al.*, 2016) across institutions.

As I have already discussed, Ball (2000) (and Hey (2001)) highlight the ontological and material anxieties that have resulted from the dramatic changes HE has experienced relative to academics through embedding practices of performance management, measurement, audit and accountability in their day to day working lives. These authors argue that the 'ontological insecurity' this has fostered results in powerful feelings of anxiety among academic staff, particularly researchers. Ball (*ibid*) indicates how the performative technologies of knowledge production and academic labour regulate academics and their scholarly productions, that Bansel (2018, pp. 548, *my emphasis*) states, "recruit[s] and regulate[s] academic behaviours through rewards and punishments – which, in turn, *produce and intensify anxiety and ambivalence.*"

Throughout this project I often felt a deep sense of anxiety about whether I was doing the 'right' things, in the 'right' ways, to produce the 'correct' academic product/s I felt *I should* be producing. In

turn, this made me question myself and whether or not I was 'fit' for doctoral study at all. I felt I

continuously failed and that both myself and my work was never good *enough.* But, because I never

felt fully able to articulate what the elusive ideal/s I felt I should be working towards were, these

feelings only intensified. Being perfectly candid, to mitigate my anxieties I either tried to work harder

and longer or, when this provided no succour, I tried to 'hide' (from) them and hide myself from

others' gaze to make it appear as though I was doing fine.

In part, this was facilitated by the fact I mostly worked from home and did not take an active part of

the day to day life of my department per se. Later, this remoteness became its own evasive strategy

to avoid myself and my inadequacies being 'exposed'. Though, in the contemporary administration

of the doctorate replete with procedures of performance tracking, audit and managerialism forcing

visibility, it is quite hard to remain 'hidden' in these ways. For instance, LJMU requires all doctoral

students, yearly, to undergo 'Annual Monitoring' that requires we submit extensive self-reports of

our 'progress' relative to prescribed 'milestones' of research degree completion. Likewise, students

in LJMU must decide which doctoral route they will follow, i.e. MPhil to PhD, or PhD Direct. In LJMU

at least, as I understand it, most students begin on an MPhil pathway and subsequently transfer to a

PhD pathway – and they do this by submitting an 'MPhil to PhD Transfer Report' and giving an oral

presentation to an academic approval committee where they must account for their 'progress'

following study approval. Those who chose a PhD Direct pathway – like myself – are not required to

do this. In truth, this choice was strategic; I routinely tried to evade the institutional gaze because I

felt inadequate and ashamed becoming more and more fearful of the visibility of these monitoring

procedures that would threaten to 'expose' me. While I satisfied all the mandatory institutional

monitoring procedures again, in truth, I was conscious of constructing an image of myself, my work

and 'progress' in the most favourable terms. I tried tactically to balance honesty with an account

that showed I was meeting expectations and 'milestones' as expected. Which is the same as saying: *I*

was not being honest at all.

I rarely felt like I was 'doing fine' and making progress – in the sense of performing as expected, in methodological enactment, in feeling like I was doing the 'right' things and producing the 'correct' academic product/s, in becoming a 'proper' academic, and in terms of my psycho-emotional state. The more I did and the more deeply I devoted myself to my studies to mitigate my anxieties, I found little solace and this only seemed to confirm the inadequacies I was already feeling. So, I started to feel more like an 'imposter'; someone who did not measure up to the expectations and 'ideal/s' nor ever would; someone who probably should never have made it to PhD study and certainly not someone who would succeed in becoming an academic. For example, unlike perceptions of my doctoral peers, I found fieldwork highly challenging and arduous. I also found writing very difficult; especially analytic-interpretive writing and writing for submission to journals. So much so in the latter that, compared to many of my peers, to date I have yet to submit a paper for review – something that will impact my post-doctoral employability. This is because I felt whatever I wrote was never be good enough because *I* (and my research) felt inadequate in so many respects. This meant I felt inferior and ashamed relative to other students. And, this spiral continued; feelings of inadequacy led to more onerous patterns of (self-)work causing physical and emotional exhaustion, and when this temporary mitigation provided no relief, those feelings intensified making me work harder and longer still, further reflecting on my own frailties and personal 'failure'.

Of course, this may – to some – sound like complaining or whinging, however, it is worth appreciating the importance of such reflexive 'troubles talk'. Mewburn (2011) seeks to disrupt conventional understandings of "troubles talk" from doctoral students, and argues this should be an object of analysis relative to "academic" identity formation:

> "When PhD students tell stories about the self, especially of the self in some kind of trouble, we should be alert to the need to listen closely: students may not always, or only, be looking for sympathy and help […] [*or*] is simply complaining. […] troubles talk in action […] are surprisingly effective *ways for PhD students to negotiate and manage the precarious process of 'becoming academic' within the contemporary academy*. […] Troubles talk is a kind of work that is done to assemble a PhD

candidate identity, but troubles talk is a pervasive feature of everyday life, not a
'pure' academic practice…" (pp. 321-324, *my emphasis*)

Mewburn argues for a re-conceptualisation of doctoral candidature as a kind of "assemblage" (pp.
323) of various processes and practices suggesting that in order for assemblage building to be
successful, various tensions and resistances need to be overcome. If this is successful, Mewburn
argues, the candidate assemblage "quietly hangs together and the primary PhD student identity – as
a developing scholar – is able to be performed with relatively little fuss." (pp. 324). Though, the
"work" required to hold this network "together" disappears and might only become visible when
things begin to go wrong, making 'troubles talk' of distinct analytic importance. In this sense,
Mewburn argues a "PhD candidature is a precarious achievement" (pp. 330). This is another reason
why it is especially important for neophyte researchers to be reflexive; to be open and candid about
our experiences of doctoral study as forms of identity work. And furthermore, by appreciating how
our own personal 'trouble' accounts resonate with the experiences of others – that they are "more
than personal […] more than individual" (Bansel, 2011, pp. 546) – we can undermine the isolating
individualisation and negative psycho-emotional effects that result from the competitive,
performative culture of HE.

Hogget (2017) theorises feelings of shame and guilt in the context of the effects of performativity
and neoliberalism offering a highly provocative analysis that, I think, is worth discussing relative to
my own feelings. Hogget (*ibid*, pp. 365) argues that "shame is the emotion of failure" and speaks to
what we (think we) do and who we (think we) 'are' relating to feelings of deficiency, inferiority,
inadequacy and imposterism. He notes that as success becomes more idealised and venerated in
neoliberalism, failure is more deeply individualised and more personally experienced:

> "…fear of shame fuels those performative regimes which now dominate the lives of
> today's educated workers and consumers […] But, in a system where success is
> idealised, this identification becomes an Achilles heel […]. *A gnawing, semi-*

permanent feeling of failure and inadequacy is the consequence of such performative

regimes where the ideal remains forever elusive. […] *The consequence is a survivalist*

culture in which performance anxieties reach right down through the body and into

the soul. […] Performativity transcends simple control; it is concerned to release the

gold from the neoliberal subject's heart and brain. It does this through *the promise*

of the ideal, something that is ultimately elusive and unobtainable, but which instils

an ethic of continuous self-improvement." (*my emphasis*)

The "ideal" – "*ultimately elusive and unobtainable*" – that Hogget identifies I think is analogous to

governmentalising ideas of a 'right' way and a 'correct' product that I keenly felt but that seemed

indefinable, impacting my doctoral-academic subjectivity, research practices and sense of self-

esteem/-worth. The "gnawing, semi-permanent feeling of failure and inadequacy" were precisely

the kinds of feelings I experienced (and continue to). Hogget cites Knight & Clarke's (2014) analysis

of the effects of performativity in academia – where they identify 3 categories of insecurity they saw

as characterising the everyday working lives of academics, two of which are of interest here.

The first is, what de Vries (2005) taking off from the initial idea introduced by Clance & Imes (1978),

calls the "imposter syndrome" (or 'imposter phenomenon') that leads people doubt their abilities

and achievements, feel they are "not as capable or adequate as others think" (Knights & Clarke,

2014, p. 355) leading them to become plagued by feelings of anxiety, deficiency and inadequacy and

to foster strategies to avoid 'exposure'. The second group is what Knight & Clarke call the

"existentialists" (*ibid*, pp. 352); those souls "riddled with self-doubt regarding the falseness,

meaninglessness and game-playing involved in satisfying the target driven system in which they

work." (Hogget, 2017, pp. 367). It occurs to me now that certain aspects of my engagement with

postmodern and poststructuralist literature – so overtly critical of neoliberalism and performativity –

may have elicited and/or exacerbated a sense of apathy regarding the "falseness, meaninglessness

and game-playing involved in" doctoral study and in becoming an academic, that may have

compounded my anxieties further. Stubbs, *et al.* (2012, pp. 440) argue "experiencing [*ones'*] work as

meaningful promotes work engagement and further protects individuals from negative states, such

as exhaustion, that might lead to burn-out…" (*see also* Gonzalez-Roma, *et al.*, 2006; Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006).

Knight & Clarke (2014, pp. 352) highlight the "compelling and seductive" nature of performativity that paradoxically "renders academics over-committed and yet simultaneously falling short of an idealized, and by definition impossible, set of managerial, peer and self-induced expectations" – which I think is evident in my drive to work harder and harder that emerged from constantly feeling as if I was "falling short" of profoundly felt, but ineffable, 'ideals'. I think it is obvious how both these types of 'insecurity' – "imposter" feelings and "existential" anxieties regarding the culture of HE – played out in my embodied ambivalent experiences of doctoral study and becoming academic identity.

Hogget also draws on his own clinical role as a "psychoanalytic psychotherapist" (pp. 377): "[c]aught in the grip of performativity, the modern self hardly ever feels itself to be enough, it never measures up – it always falls short before the imagined gaze of the other" (pp. 369). Here, we can draw parallels to Bansel's discussions and, in turn, to my own deficient and self-deprecating reflections based on how understood many of my fellow PhD students. What this perhaps highlights is how such feelings, and identity work, are relativistic; caught up in discourses of comparison, competition, visibility and accountability. Though, I feel I '*know*' that it is likely that many of my fellow students were feeling the same ways I was, similarly straining to avoid their own 'exposure'.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that at *no point* I did not feel happy, successful, deserving of praise, and like I was doing well and making progress. Of course, I did; however, these were temporary. In fact, the more I think about them now, the more I believe they did not truly represent feelings of happiness, satisfaction, etc. as much as short-lived reprieves until the same feelings emerged, causing shame, forcing me to reflect and work on myself again.

"Performativity [*necessarily*] generates a subject consumed by performative anxiety, a subject constantly measuring itself against an (unobtainable) ideal and threatened by overwhelming shame." (*ibid*, pp. 375)

It is only now, in the late stages of composing this thesis, that I have spent more time thinking about those feelings more deeply – where they had come from, and why? what effects had they had and continue to have? How could I begin to 'free' myself from the myth of the "ideal"? This led me, full circle, back to think about performativity, but this time more expansively and critically, connecting my own methodological discussions with substantive interpretive discussions and with my experiences of becoming an academic through doctoral study – and all together.

To close, here, I think there is no more apropos an example of just how collective these effects may be than to point, *again*, to the mental health and wellbeing "crisis" in HE that appear to be have marked effects on/for doctoral students and early career researchers, many of which echo my own experiences.

Schmidt & Hansson (2018) offer a "literature review" of primary studies relating to doctoral students' wellbeing, exploring a range of predominantly quantitative and mixed-methods studies to paint a generalised picture of this field of scholarship. They highlight a range of mental health and wellbeing 'stressors' doctoral students commonly report, such as: peer pressure, frequent evaluations, assessments and performance monitoring processes, feelings of low academic status, increased/intensified workloads, publishing pressures and challenges of writing in more general terms (*see also* Cotterall, 2011), expectations of active participation in the local and broader academic environments, post-doctoral employment uncertainties and the added pressure to position oneself favourably during study for post-doctoral employment (*see also* Martinez*, et al.*, 2013), poor or strained relationships with supervisors, issues of engagement within supervision relationships (*see also* Cornwall*, et al.*, 2019), the multiple, cross-cutting roles doctoral students

must manage through their studies (i.e. student, researcher, teacher/lecturer, employee, parent, carer, etc.) (*see also* Bates & Goff, 2012), financial pressures, work-life (im)balances, obscurity of common processes and expectations of doctoral study and students, issues of identity and 'belonging' in the scholarly community (*see also* Barry, *et al.*, 2018), the perceived "burdensome" nature of some academic environments and cultures (*see also* Stubb, *et al.,* 2011), social (and cultural) isolation, low confidence, anxiety, self-doubt and 'imposter' feelings (*see also* Cisco, 2019; Cornwall, *et al.*, 2019; Sohn, 2016), issues regarding domain specific skill and expertise (*see also* Barry, *et al.*, 2018), access to necessary resources, and other contextual factors such as personal/family situations, bereavement, relocation (especially pertinent to international, non-English students) and health-related issues (*see* Barry, *et al.*, 2018), to name only a handful of the most commonly reported. Many of these I have already introduced here.

Some studies report that, as a result of these simultaneous 'pressures' and competing 'demands', attrition rates among doctoral students can as high as 30-50% (Jiranek, 2010; Gardener, 2008; McAlpin & Norton, 2006; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Over 50% of Antilla, *et al.*'s (2015) cohort reported they had considered dropping out as a result of pervasive stress, anxiety and exhaustion, resulting in apathy and lack of interest (*see also* Cornér, Löfström & Pyhältö, 2017). Furthermore, even among those who do manage to navigate these 'pressures' successfully to complete their studies, as Hunter & Devine's (2016) show, almost a third of graduates seek careers outside of HE. In whatever way we look at these, they all represent a 'loss'.

Many studies have explored the effects such "stressors" (Cornwall*, et al.*, 2019) may have on doctoral students with regards to their mental health and wellbeing, such as: stress and distress, fatigue and 'burnout', physical and psycho-emotional exhaustion (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Appel & Duhlgren, 2003), feeling overwhelmed and incapacitated (Barry, *et al.*, 2018), cynicism (Cornér, Löfström & Pyhältö, 2017), 'imposter' feelings (Chakraverty, 2018) including guilt, shame (Pychyl &

Little, 1998), low self-esteem and -worth (Sonnak & Towell, 2001), and most profoundly, clinical psychiatric disorders (Levecque, *et al.,* 2017) like depression, mood, anxiety and panic disorders. Indeed, both Toews, *et al.* (1997) and Hyun, *et al.*, (2006) indicate that doctoral students are more likely than their undergraduate counterparts, and more likely again compared to the general population norm, to experience increased levels of stress leading to psychological distress and clinical conditions.

Many of these studies also offer institutional practice and policy recommendations – and it is here where I hope to articulate a series of key convergences with the substantive-interpretive contributions of this study, particularly with regards to the technology of "resilience".

Interestingly, Schmidt & Hansson's (2019) piece begins by constructing the problem-space giving rise to their "literature review". They suggest that: "…wellbeing [*has been*] found to be closely linked to employee productivity and efficiency…" (pp. 1). They operationalise a definition of 'wellbeing' for their "review", arguing we should understand it "in the work setting", as "closely related to organisational functioning" and something that "play[s] a major role in achieving the objectives of HE" (*ibid*). They argue that the importance of understanding wellbeing in this way, is because "the wellbeing of academics might affect their productivity in both research and teaching, *ultimately influencing the quality of HE* (Vera, Salanova & Martin, 2010). […] …poor wellbeing could be detrimental to their engagement in research and teaching" (*ibid, my emphasis*).

The issue here, I believe, is how the problematic issue of doctoral/academic mental health and wellbeing are framed – what is the problem (a problem of)? What, or whom, are they problems for? and, what kinds of solutions are recommended, and to whom are they addressed? It seems clear that invoking ideas of "employee productivity and efficiency", "organisational functioning" and "the quality of HE" bring the hegemonic neoliberal and performative discursive rationalities structuring

dominant understandings of HE that impact the construction of the 'problem' of student mental health into sharp relief. This also necessarily conditions how we understand the effects, who is impacted, how, what the logical solutions are and to what ends are they aligned.

In Schmidt & Hansson's (2019) extensive review, at least, the 'problem' appears to be framed by performative institutional concerns rather than concerns primarily regarding individuals' health and wellbeing. I think this is a clear indication that while academic and doctoral student mental health and wellbeing are now matters of profound concern, they are still very much understood as a function of the needs and priorities of the neoliberal academy they are subsumed by. So, *whose problems they are?* Primarily, the institutions. But, *whose job it is to address them?* The individual. Many of the practice, policy and pedagogy recommendations offered in extant literature are addressed, not at the level of the institution, but at the individual student. Here, I think we can appreciate convergences my analyses of "resilience", in *Brook College*, as a technology of the self indicative of "embedded neoliberalism" (Joseph, 2013) that requires students take care of themselves *for* themselves.

In their own recommendations, Schmidt & Hansson's (2018, pp. 1, *my emphasis*) "call [*sic*] for […] doctoral students, at the beginning of their career*, to be given the right tools to remain healthy in their work environment*". In this respect they recommend institutions focus on equipping and empowering doctoral students with 'personalised' "coping" strategies:

> "Coping ability is yet another central aspect of doctoral student wellbeing. For these students, coping mechanisms are necessary to manage stress and maintain sanity, physical health and mental wellbeing – that is, to remain healthy (Martinez, *et al.*, 2013)" (*ibid*, pp. 7).

They cite Kumar & Cavallero's (2018) work to emphasise "individual driven self-care and promotion of self-care by the institution" as appropriate responses to the "balancing act" of "managing stress"

(*ibid*, pp. 7-8). They cite Carver & Connor-Smith (2010) to corroborate their recommendations stating that "well developed strategies such as social or problem-focused coping have been shown to be effective to manage stress" (ibid, pp. 11). Part of their review includes a SWOT (*Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats*) analysis where, under "strengths", they cite Shavers & Moore's (2014) thoughts that "…developing optimal resistance strategies to enhance wellbeing such as 'teaching doctoral students to affirm themselves daily and develop positive thinking patterns." (*ibid*, pp. 8) as productive 'solutions'. But, the "resistance strategies" they refer to are not really antagonistic to the causes or antecedents of stress, but are resistance to stress itself showing how the academic faculty for critical subversion might be being colonised as we pick up technologies of governance as technologies of the self.

Waight & Giordano (2018, pp. 394) also advocate "supporting students [*developing their own strategies of*] emotional resilience". Barry *et al.* (2018, pp. 468, *my emphasis*), on the other hand, at the very outset of their article suggest that the most frequent 'challenge' reported by students "related to the development of generic skills, followed by *management of self*…". Indeed, it is worth noting that Barry, *et al.*'s (*ibid*, pp. 470; 476; 480) study forms part of a larger project studying the "efficacy of mindfulness practice (Warnecke, *et al.,* 2011)" in terms of students "managing themselves", their own psychological health and wellbeing through "self-care […] tools" – supported by Conley, *et al.* (2013). Pyhältö, *et al.* (2012, pp. 5) explores the "challenges of becoming a scholar" reporting that the "…majority of problems [*students faced*] were related to self-regulation […] and self-efficacy". Another article in *Nature* focuses on "the pressures of a scientific career", where Sohn (2016, pp. 321) underscores "resilience" as a key idea and self-practice for many contemporary academics who have become disillusioned with changes to their work.

In the same way as I theorised resilience in *Brook College*'s students, I believe these recommendations point to the same kinds of responsibilisations in doctoral students. Given the

range of factors and 'stressors' noted above that so clearly implicate performativity and the dramatic neoliberalisation of the academy, the 'solutions' all focus on equipping students with psycho-emotional tools and strategies, and 'empowering' them to use them and deal with problems themselves. Here, the university/institution plays the laissez-faire role of the neoliberal state subtly rolling back its responsibilities *to* their students and *for* the context and organisation of doctoral education, simultaneously responsibilising individuals to simply, cope and survive rather than flourish.

It is evident how doctoral students, in the same ways as *Brook* students, are encouraged to become fully autonomous, self-aware self-managers, capable at auditing themselves to stimulate adaptive change in response to externally imposed performative demands and priorities, equipped with the psycho-technologies of the self. And the more individuals are responsibilised, the more the 'social' context is elided from view. Students are turned away from the outside world and focus solely on themselves, their minds and their responses to neoliberal performativity and its problematic impacts, like deteriorating mental health and wellbeing, instead locating the causes *in themselves* – meaning the only viable 'solutions' are individual strategies of "resilience" fostering greater self-discipline. In this respect, is also analytically relevant to highlight that almost none of the literature I have come across in this 'field' make reference to neoliberalism and/or performativity – even if they do cite lists of causative factors and 'stressors' that have emerged and been exacerbated *by* the significant intensification of performativity in HE. While some undoubtedly valuable scholarship is going on from which we can derive meaningful insights to pursue reforms to doctoral study, until the focus shifts more to the socio-political context and performative 'culture' of HE, with regards to mental health, we will only add more weight onto already pressurised individuals by responsibilising them with both the causes *and* solution to their own wellbeing.

Likewise, until we embed a more expansive and nuanced articulations of doctoral study and the production of a doctoral thesis, a slow, often highly challenging, non-linear educational process rather than a commodified 'product', we will only remain 'trapped' by performativity. Stubb, *et al.* (2012, pp. 441, *my emphasis*) states:

> "Although a more product- or achievement-focused orientation may in some cases be adaptive in terms of study success (e.g. Diseth & Martinsen, 2003; Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro & Niemivirta, 2008), *focusing on performing well may constitute a risk for subjective well-being*. Studies suggest that in general emphasizing one's own development and growth in university studying is positively related to well-being and positive emotions, such as interest and enthusiasm (e.g., Schmuck, Kasser & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci & Kasser, 2004; Seifert, 2004). *Focusing on external factors on the other hand, such as performing well in the eyes of others has been found to relate negatively to well-being and to provide a risk for maladaptive emotions during studying*."

This then relates to issues regarding the subjective meaning/s and 'outcomes' of (what) doctoral study ('is' or should be) as students understand, experience and perform them. Perhaps less focus on academic performance, 'products' and 'outcomes', and more focus on process, on learning, developing expertise, knowledge and understanding, on personal and psycho-emotional growth, development and wellbeing, as Shavers & Moore (2014) argue, will lead to more coherent, centred, less 'ambivalent' forms of doctoral education, academic labour and identity that may turn the tide on the "crisis" of mental health.

8.3.2. The 'Great Refusal': Against things as they 'are'

I would like to 'end' here by noting the potentials and possibilities for resistance; for the creation and emergence of something 'new'; something other than what currently 'is', in these respects. Garland (2013) offers us such a possibility through taking up the critical theoretical project emergent of Marcuse's work in seeking a "radical praxis or what can be defined as a politics of refusal" (pp.

375, *my emphasis*) against life in advanced late capitalist societies – that is, "*negating that which negates us*" (*ibid*). Elsewhere, Garland (2017, pp. 1, emphasis in original) argues that the dominant form of society today *is* neoliberal capitalism and, through the 'actually existing' illusion it creates, it "maintains its own hegemony of 'inevitability'" by the assumption "that because 'it exists' it *should* do, and is 'all there is' or can be"; "TINA (There is No Alternative), as Margaret Thatcher liked to put it" (*ibid*).

Garland's (*ibid*) analysis of 'post-politics' demonstrates that:

> "Neoliberalism has for decades set the terms of the 'post-political' as parties
> of all shades have competed to 'deliver what works' long since having dispensed
> with such esoteric notions as political philosophy - which is dismissed as 'ideology'
> by something that is itself deeply ideological." (pp. 3)

Garland argues that, "like the 'dismal science' of economistic reason" claimed itself "to not being an ideology at all, but rather a 'science'", neoliberalism's 'what works' motif has positioned itself as "'beyond ideology'" and 'beyond politics' – "a claim as deeply ideological as it is possible to make." (*ibid*, pp. 2). In this way, Garland notes, neoliberalism "depoliticizes and disarms critique and removes questions which are inherently political and politicized by making them 'beyond question' and the terms already set being 'common sense.'" (pp. 3). "Indeed," as Garland highlights, "the 'postpolitics' of the past 25 years can certainly be understood as a further closing of the political universe, One Dimensional Thought sanctifying "that which is" [*(Marcuse, 1964, pp. 120)*]."
It is in this context that Garland advocates we try to critically break with "that which is", and adopt a "*new politics of refusal*" (2013, pp. 385, emphasis in original) by fostering a "negative ontology" (pp. 376) and "negative and resistant subjectivity" (*ibid*) through a re-engagement with Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, particularly the work of Marcuse. He defines this engagement as "the active form of a radically different mode-of-being and mode-of-doing, which Marcuse would define as 'the Great Refusal'" (*ibid*). To pursue this 'Great Refusal', he argues that:

> "…the need to rupture, to break with the all-but-total unfreedom of the present, is the condition of a resistant subjectivity existing in-and-against the same world it seeks to break with, and the urgency of this need to break with the present is felt all the more the longer we are forced to exist within it, and so it is possible to speak […] of a negative ontology recognising that subjectivity exists within and against the deadening, reified relation of objects which is the status of human beings buying and selling themselves on the market. […] subjective refusal […] [*therefore*] recognises in its insubordination and refusal the negation of this non-status, in which objectively we only exist for capital…" (pp. 378)

From a critical theoretical, neo-Marxist position, Garland argues that "we are enmeshed in [*capitalist*] social relations of alienation and domination we did not choose and did not wish for and yet are compelled to reproduce everyday as a matter of survival." (pp. 379). It is our subjectification and objectification through capitalist relations, and as such the neoliberal doctrine supporting them, that he suggests we try to "turn against" (pp. 377). To work against the objectifying and deadening social relations, and precarious conditions, of life in advanced late capitalist societies neoliberalism has compounded, Garland suggests instead we start "…from a negative ontology, of being-in-the-world […] for to exist *in spite of* capital and its imperatives and against the infernal continuum of the history it has made and would make for the future, is merely *to be* and so the negation of that which negates us." (pp. 377, emphasis in original).

To "refuse what we are" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 216), refuse 'things-as-they-are', and to 'negate that which negates us', Garland encourages us to engage in minor "acts of refusal" – an example he gives, in the context of HE, are the recent UK mass student protests that 'refused' "the burden of debt that comes from education as an unaffordable privilege, even as it is restructured into an instrumental production line for the social factory" (pp. 379).

Performatively speaking, according to Holloway (2010, pp. 109), because "[w]e make capitalism", we also have the power to 'unmake it' in the same ways:

"We have the power to consciously remake both the form and content of the world, and yet we are prisoners of it. Thus in existing *in spite* of this, and choosing to do what we consider necessary or desirable, and also refusing as far as possible to reproduce the relations of capitalism, we assert our own negative and resistant subjectivity…" (Garland, 2013, pp. 381)

Garland, here, highlights what I feel may be one of the most significant critical and collective challenge of our present neoliberal, performative condition – a refusal of "things-as-they-are" (Garland, 2017, pp. 6) and "what we are" (Foucault, 1982, p. 216) as a result. Garland suggests we can develop our "negative and resistant subjectivity" (2011, pp. 376) simply through our mere *being-in-the-world* for itself, as "existence [*both within and*] against things as they are" (*ibid*). In this subversive mode of being 'within' but always 'against', we are offered a "transformative promise" (pp. 377) through "small, daily acts which just by their doing, by their very existence, are antagonistic to capital and hierarchical power" (pp. 380) that "only recognises the production of value and the extraction off profit" and casts "human beings as instrumental means to that end" (pp. 376). That is, we must *try* to be critical about our present socio-political and cultural contexts, about ourselves, what we do and why; we must try to recognise our subjectification and become aware of the performative, discursive practices by which that subject is constituted and performed, and the 'world' it is meant to fit. Upon such critical reflections and realisations, then, we can begin to theorize "'what we're up against'" – which is "inseparable from contesting and seeking to change it" for Garland (2017, pp. 5). By critiquing "things-as-they-are", and why they are the way they are, along with the "positive modes of thought which severely limit the capabilities of opposition and critique" (*ibid*, pp. 6), we can begin to reclaim politics and antagonism, and so begin to conceive of how things (and ourselves) might be different. Through "critique and knowing 'what we are up against'" (*ibid*, pp. 6), then, we will be able to conceive of a "negative ontology", foster a "resistant subjectivity" and engage in those minor "acts of refusal" towards generating a "radical praxis" to 'negate that which negates us' opening up:

"…a uniquely rich process of life-lived-for-its-own-sake, as an end-in-itself, which does not fulfil any functional instrumentality […] [*a*] desire [*that*] can be viewed as a significant and inherently subversive activity making noticeable cracks in the system." (Garland, 2013, pp. 382)

8.3.3. Endpoints-Starting points:

I could go on and on and on interpreting and theorising from the layers of data generated in this study, but this thesis must come to an (arbitrary) 'end'. I hope I have offered a range of illuminative and provocative interpretations of students' experiences of progressing into HE from a large 6th form college that could help to enhance and better contextualise our understandings of the dominant social, political and ideological forces impacting on young people today as they complete their A-Level studies and embark on the transition from school to university, and moreover, on the rapidly changing nature and purpose/s of contemporary HE. So too, I hope I have also offered a range of 'valuable' insights and reflections – "*openings*" (Stronach & MacLure, 1997) – on the experiences and practices/processes of conducting a qualitative-interpretive ethnographic inquiry, seeking to be informed by postmodern-poststructural perspectives, in the performative culture of the neoliberal academy and how these reflections intimately connect with the substantive interpretations I have offered.

Through this work, I feel I have learned important lessons. It is, after all, an educational PhD and should, therefore, be educative. I feel I have learned a great deal and have expanded my thinking about schools and teachers, about HE, about who students entering HE today *are* and perhaps need to be, about the contemporary socio-political and ideological context in which HE now exists and functions, and about the increasingly prevalent and profound forces of neoliberal performativity that appear to structure almost every aspect of our day-to-day lives – not simply education – that have helped me develop my understanding and expertise in this academic field. In this, I have also learned invaluably 'hard' lessons about the nature and conduct of qualitative-interpretive, ethnographic research and about myself as a researcher and as a person. Though, for me, this learning does not

represent an endpoint in any pure sense, but rather is another set of starting points, another set of

"opening[s]", to continue to examine and explore in the future in my (perpetual) personal project of

learning and development as a researcher and as a person.

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Appendix 1: Principles of Procedure

| Project Title: "Young people's futures & their experiences progressing from 6th form college" |

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An **Open Letter to Brook College and Staff** from Michael A. Elliott (lead researcher)

Hello Everyone,

Firstly, I would like to say a big thank-you to everyone at the college for all the help you have given me so far in developing the focus of my PhD – it has been very much appreciated.

What I would like to do now is say a bit more about what I hope to do next. In the initial stages of the research I have been, largely, getting to know people in the college and seeing how you all work. Now I would like to develop a clearer set of aims and begin to interview staff, students and parents. As some of you may know, my research interests include:

− *The experiences of young people, along with their parent/s and staff, currently engaged in making choices about their future progressing from 6th form college*
− *The experiences of young people completing formal applications to university via UCAS and early application systems, and their perceptions of the role of college staff & parents in supporting this activity*
− *Perceptions & beliefs (of all parties) around different course programmes and qualifications as providing pathways for certain futures (i.e. A-Level & Vocational qualifications, apprenticeships, etc.)*
− *The attitudes and experiences of college staff in supporting and advising young people making choices about their future*

Of course, Brook College is a fantastic place to explore such questions because of the many groups you work with, and the multiple ways in which you support young people in accessing higher education, other further education opportunities, work-related experiences and employment. My research, with your help, will contribute to understanding more about how young people negotiate this terrain and how their experiences contribute to understandings about themselves and their (possible) futures. This will be put into a wider context, when I write my Ph.D, in relation to government policy in this area.

Before I ask any of you to participate in an interview, however, I want to outline how the data gathering, analysis, and writing up will be carried out. One of the reasons I want to explain this is because your college will constitute a case-study in my PhD thesis – in other words, it is the only college I am working in. It is particularly important, then, to think carefully about how the college will be portrayed, and your part in helping me understand how the college works.

I believe it is very important to enter into a dialogue with anyone who is happy to get involved in this research and so I will be asking you throughout the process if you are happy for me to include what you have told me, and to include some of your interpretations alongside my own as the project develops. The sheet which follows lays out in more detail how I intend to work, in this respect.

Working in this way will also allow me to stay close to your views & experiences, and to the themes and ideas that I cannot, at this stage, predict. This means that the project itself will continue to change and develop as I enter the next phase of data gathering. I will endeavour to keep everyone up to date about emerging orientations of the project, likely through another letter such as this one.

At any point, please feel free to ask questions about how I am working and what participation in the project might mean for you. Please let me know of any concerns you have and, if you would like to, please feel free to contact my Principle Research Supervisor Jo Frankham (j.frankham@ljmu.ac.uk). Thank you again for all your help and support thus far.

 Yours Sincerely,

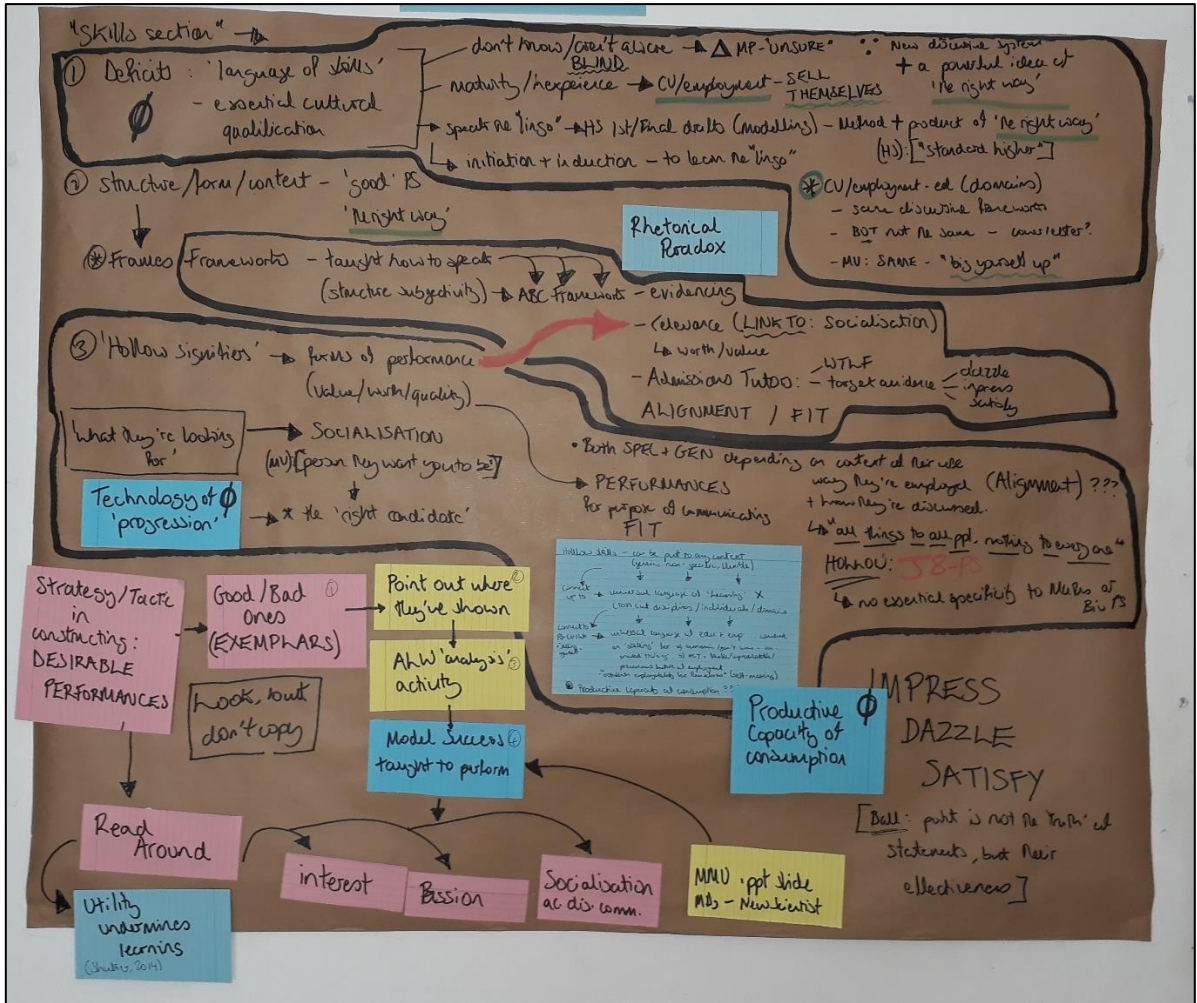Michael A. Elliott

Principles of Procedure

During the opening phases of this research project I have been observing the day-to-day life of the college, getting to know people and gathering data about how you all work. The observational data I have been collecting will be used to gain a sense of context and provide orienting ideas & themes for later stages of the study. Following from these initial observations & conversations with students, staff & parents I will be seeking volunteers to participate in interviews based, in part, on observational data gathered. Should individuals agree to participate in an interview with me these procedures will be followed:

1. Interviews will be conducted at a time and location convenient & appropriate for participants and I hope to get permission to audio record these. Due to the diverse nature of the participants to be included in this study, some interviews may be conducted outside of Brook College (i.e. with Parents of Students) for convenience and privacy – this will be organised at the wishes of specific individuals.

2. Interviews will be based in part on a combination of observational data gathered, previous interview encounters and my own interpretations of collected data.

3. After interview/s have been conducted, they will be transcribed and participants will be sent a copy of their transcript.

4. Participants may then choose to comment on, edit or remove certain information as they see fit – any such data may not then be used directly in either analysis or publication. Other elements of participant's interviews may be quoted verbatim, but all quotes will be anonymised. Information will also be disguised if it is deemed 'sensitive' (for example: if I believe you could possibly identify a particular student, parent or member of staff, or the College, from what has been said).

5. I will share my own emerging interpretations & analysis of the observational and interview data with participants and will encourage individuals to offer their own views such that we can include and account for multiple perspectives & interpretations.

6. All data will be held securely by the researcher throughout the project – any & all data pertaining to specific individuals or institutions will be kept anonymously and pseudonyms used for the purposes of confidentiality.

7. No data will be shared with any other research participant/s and/or institution/s without prior consent.

8. As the sole author of the study I will take responsibility for the final written version of the Ph.D study – however, this will take account of any commentary participants wish to include.

9. In addition to the Ph.D, I will be seeking to write academic papers based on the research. These papers will likely reach a larger audience than the Ph.D itself. Consequently, I will remove from the work any information that would make the College or individuals identifiable.

10. All participants will be made aware throughout the project that they reserve the right to remove themselves and all data pertaining to them at any stage without explanation.
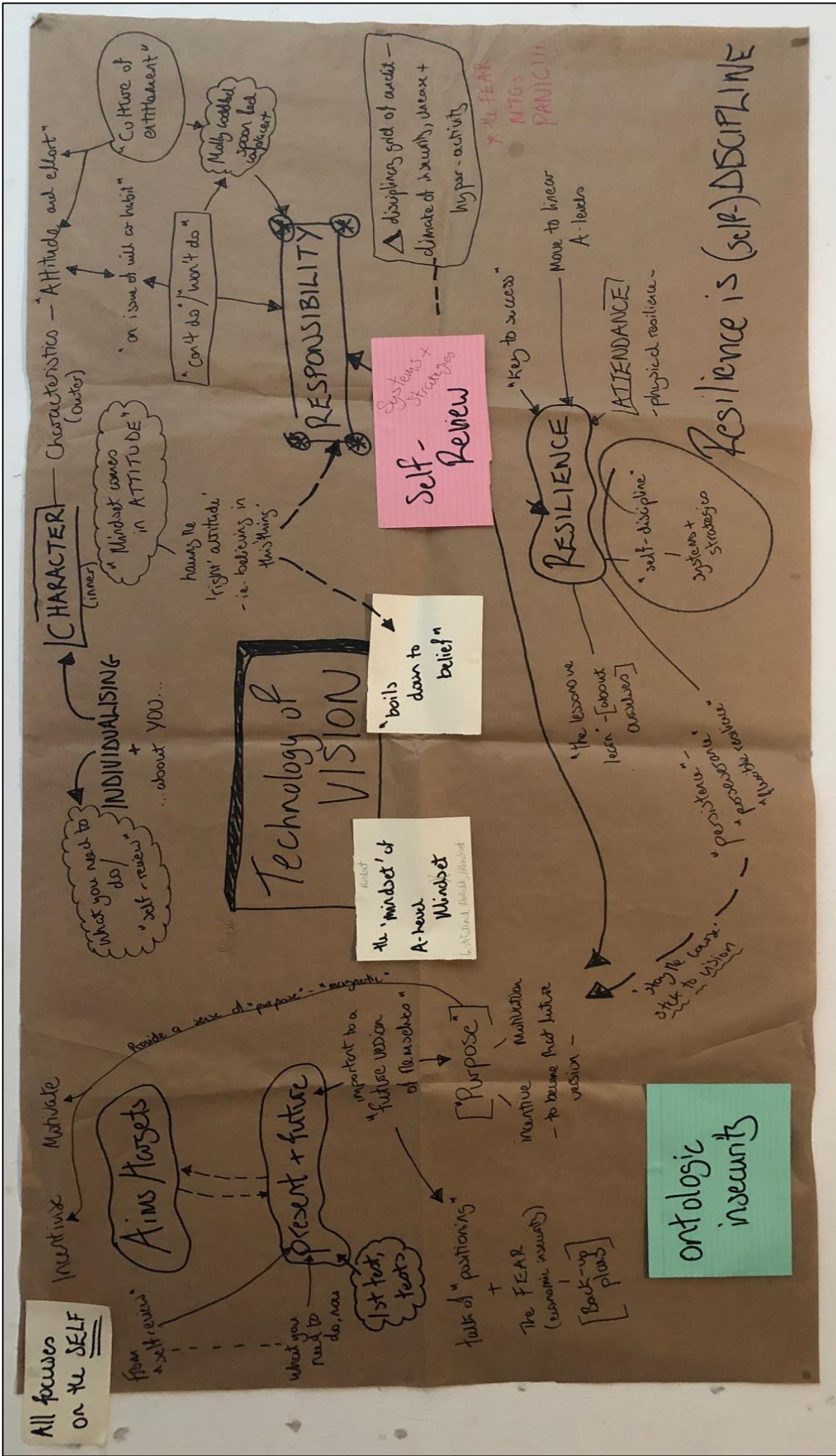
Appendix 2: 'Messy' Analytic Maps
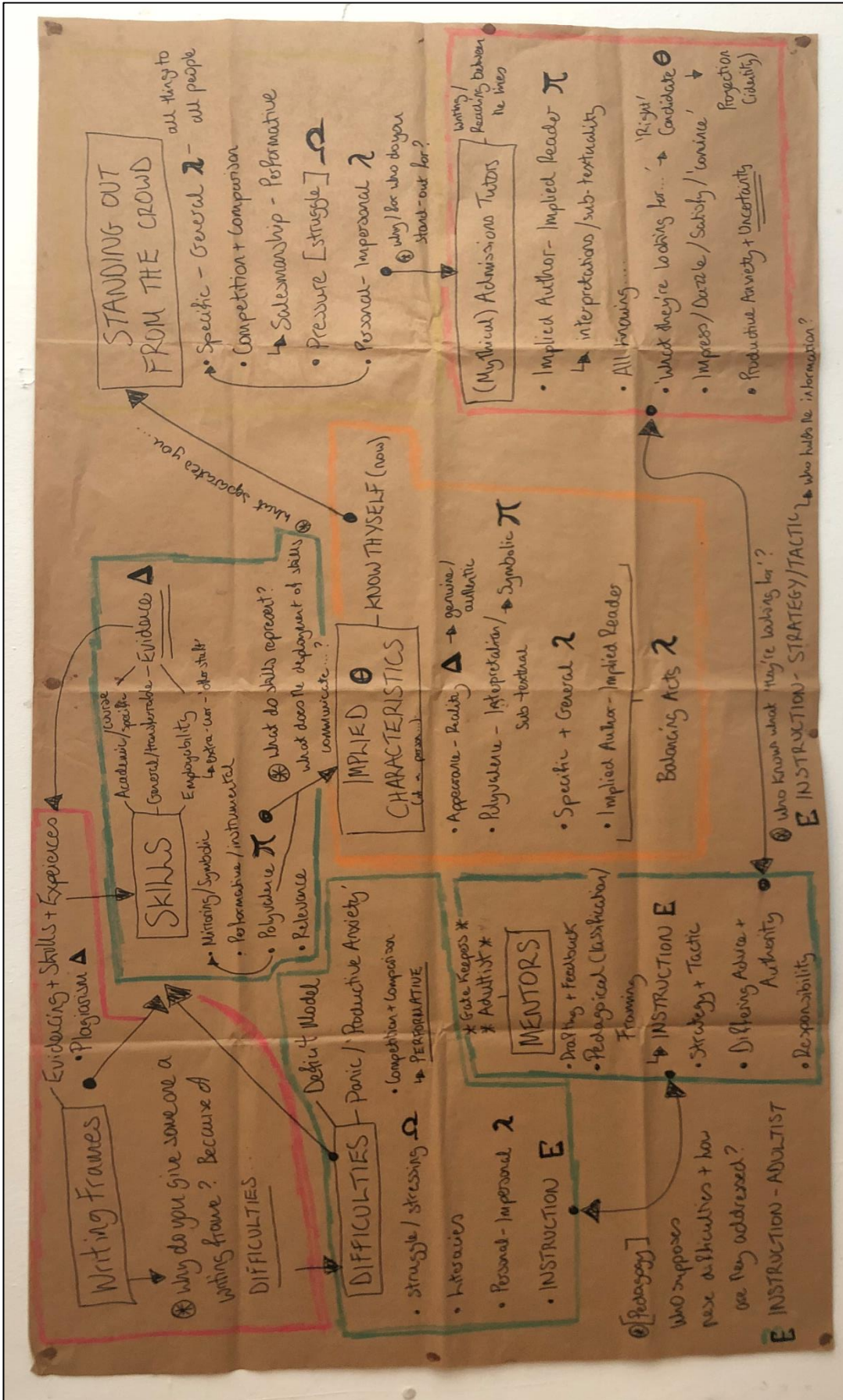
1.0.   UCAS Personal Statements Messy Analytic Map

1.1. UCAS Personal Statements Messy Analytic Map-Writing Plan

All focused on the SELF

Culture of entitlement

Attitude and effort

CHARACTER — Characteristics — (outer)

an issue of will or habit

Can't do / won't do

Mildly coddled spoon fed adolescent

A disciplined grid of audit — climate of warmth, warmth + hyper-activity

the FEAR INTO PANIC!!!

RESPONSIBILITY

"Mindset comes in ATTITUDE"

having the 'right' attitude! — ie. believing in this thing

INDIVIDUALISING + ...about YOU...

what you need to do / self-review

Self-Review — Systems + strategies

Technology of VISION

"boils down to belief"

The 'mindset' of A-level Mindset

the lessons we learn - [about ourselves]

"persistence" — "perseverance" — "physical resilience"

they're stick to course to vision

RESILIENCE

"Key to success"

Move to linear A-levels

ATTENDANCE! — physical resilience —

self-discipline / systems + strategies

Resilience is (self-)DISCIPLINE

Aims/targets

Motivate

Incentivise

from self-review

Present + future

provide a sense of 'purpose' - 'magnetic'

important to a 'future vision' of themselves

Purpose

incentive motivation - to believe that future vision -

1st test, tests

talk of 'positioning' +

The FEAR (economic insecurity) — [Back-up plans]

what you need to do, now

ontological insecurity

2.0. A-Level Mindset Messy Analytic Map

CHARACTER

Technology of VISION

SUCCESS – PERFORMANCE – POTENTIAL – ABILITY

RESILIENCE – "key this now"

2.1. A-Level Mindset Messy Analytic Map-Writing Plan

3.0. Interview Messy Analytic Map: Frances (1)
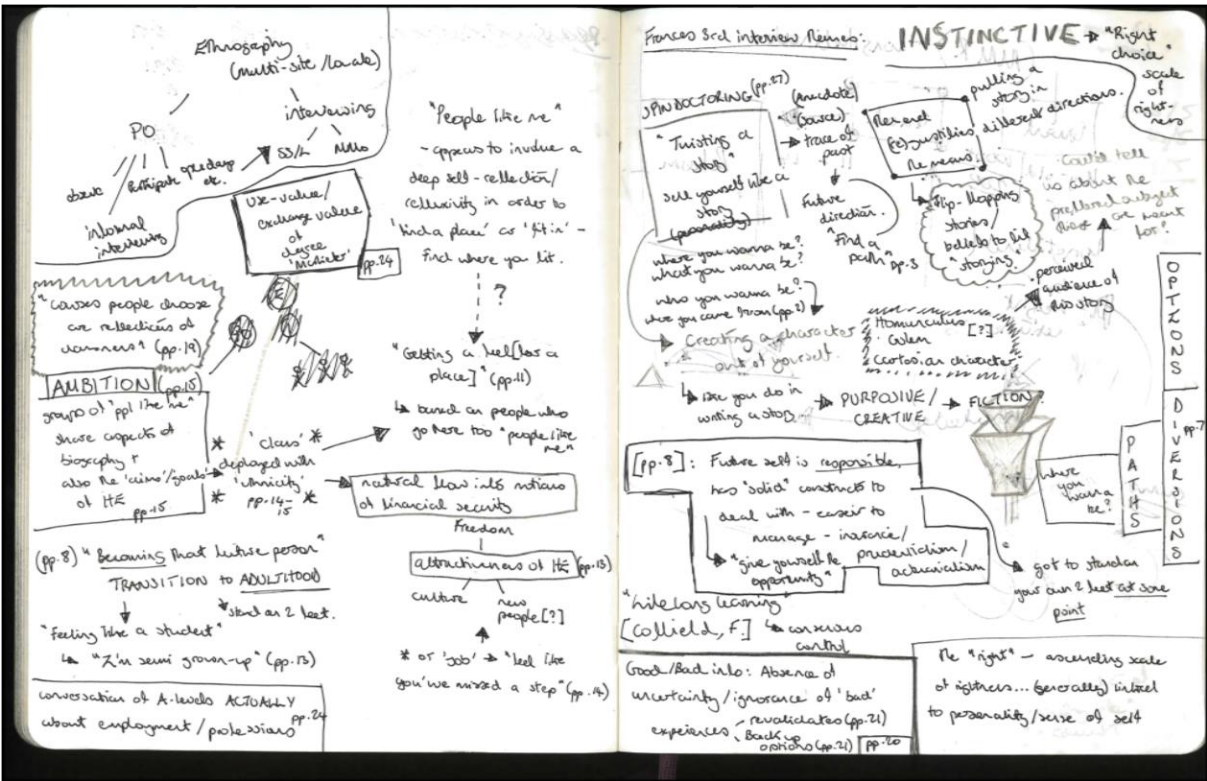
3.1. Interview Messy Analytic Map: Frances (2)

3.2. Interview Messy Analytic Map: Frances (3)