(Mis)recognising the symbolic violence of academically selective education in England: a critical application of Bourdieusian analysis to pupils' lived experiences

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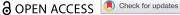
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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to critical scholarship of the concept of symbolic violence by raising two questions. The first concerns the extent to which symbolic violence is recognised and misrecognised by those who experience it. The second problematises the relationship between symbolic violence and social justice by considering how an accepted relationship of disadvantaged = dominated is itself a misrecognition. The specific form of symbolic violence I explore relates to the English system of academically selective education. I examine the lived experiences of three pupils who took and did not pass the '11+' (the exam taken by pupils which determines entrance to an academically selective 'grammar' school). The tools of pedagogic action, pedagogic work and pedagogic authority are used to demonstrate how symbolic violence operated in the 'everyday suffering' of the pupils. I also highlight that such suffering enhanced pupils' awareness of the rules of the game allowing them to recognise the potential for capacitation that arose from intentional compliance with the dominant. Re-positioning the pupils as not in need of emancipation highlights the misrecognition within the relationship between symbolic violence and social justice. I argue that recognising the contextual complexities of social justice is a means of countering such misrecognition.

Bourdieu and Passeron's writing on the relationship between symbolic violence and education in *Reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) has provided education scholars with the necessary tools to reveal and theoretically explain countless examples of symbolic violence. In this paper, I contribute to critical scholarship of symbolic violence by questioning whether the concept is both recognised as well as misrecognised by those who experience it. By asking this question, I do not seek to dispute the value of significant amounts of literature which have utilised a Bourdieusian approach to demonstrate incidents and patterns of symbolic violence within education. However, I do acknowledge that the relationship between symbolic violence and social justice can be viewed as incorporating both recognition and misrecognition.

The specific form of symbolic violence I explore relates to the English system of academically selective education. State-funded, academically selective systems currently operate in 11 of the 151 local authorities in England (Long et al., 2023). In these areas, pupils sit an entrance exam in their final year of primary school (the '11+') which determines entry to an academically selective secondary school (a 'grammar school'). My overarching aim in this paper is to explore the 'ordinary suffering' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 4) experienced by pupils who take and do not pass this exam. Foregrounding such suffering facilitates a critical examination of academically selective systems and recognises the misrecognitions inherent within an interpretation of disadvantaged = dominated.

Watkins (2018) argues that a micro view of the actual interactions that constitute an individual's everyday life offers a means of questioning assumptions related to the macro structures associated with symbolic violence. I adopt such a micro view by focusing on pupils' lived experiences. Following McNay (2004), p. I argue that Bourdieu's thinking tools align with an understanding of lived experience as a relational construct which is shaped by structures that are simultaneously subjective and objective. Narratives of pupils' lived experiences are analysed using the concept of symbolic violence and the associated tools of pedagogic action, pedagogic authority and pedagogic work. Such analysis demonstrates how the academically selective system perpetuates symbolic violence. However, examining such micro views using Bourdieu's conceptual toolbox also reveals instances of capacitation for the dominated that is obtained by intentional compliance with the dominant. This leads to the consideration of how such capacitation presents problematic elements to established ways of thinking about symbolic violence and its relationship with social justice.

Before presenting my methodological approach, two categories of relevant literature are explored. The first explores international literature on the relationship between academic selection and inequality within education. The second recognises some of the misrecognitions that operate in tandem with symbolic violence. As academic selection operates differently in different contexts, the following terms are used throughout this paper. 'Academically selective systems' are systems which separate pupils into different schools based on ability judgements. Such systems generally differentiate between academic schools and vocational/technical schools. Academically selective systems are distinguished from the academically selective practice of 'setting' (where a pupil is placed in ability groups which differ across subjects, sometimes referred to as subject-based tracking) which operates within a school.

Educational inequality and academic selection

The relationship between educational inequality and academic selection is well established within the sociology of education. The sociological criticism of the English academically selective system presented by Himmelweit (1973) and Floud et al. (1956) brought attention to the under-representation of working class pupils in grammar schools. This pattern aligns with a recent international claim presented by the OECD: 'equity in education tended to improve in countries where the prevalence of academic selectivity decreased' (OECD, 2020, p. 84). Although I focus on the English academically

selective system, the pattern of such systems appearing to work in favour of pupils from more advantaged backgrounds clearly operates internationally. It is therefore salient to consider international scholarship on academic selection in order to explore its relationship with educational inequality.

One way of doing this is by thinking of academically selective education as a continuum. At one end would be a completely selective system, in which pupils are segregated into different types of schools at an early age. The opposite end of this imagined continuum would be a fully comprehensive system in which pupils are taught in entirely mixed ability classes for the duration of their time in education. In reality, most countries' state-funded education systems could be plotted somewhere along this continuum, depending on pupil age when selection occurs and whether selection operates as a system or practice. Examining research from international contexts placed at different points of this continuum provides a useful way of investigating the relationship between academically selective education and inequality at a macro level.

Large-scale quantitative studies within several international contexts have revealed an overall trend of pupils from lower social classes being more highly represented in vocational or technical schools. In Italy, where pupils encounter an academically selective system aged 14, social class has been presented as the most significant factor related to school type, even when controlling for previous academic performance (Barone et al., 2021; Contini & Triventi, 2016). Although Merino et al. (2021) note that the Spanish academically selective system operates beyond compulsory school age (16 years), they reveal a similar pattern. Such a pattern is evident in quantitative studies of countries where academically selective systems begin earlier, when pupils are aged 11. Within the academically selective areas of England, statistics from 2022 indicate that around 6% of pupils attending grammar school were eligible for free school meals (a proxy for disadvantage). This is compared to a national figure of 21% (Long et al., 2023). Data spanning the international contexts where academically selective systems operate demonstrate that pupils from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to attend an academically selective school. This seems far removed from providing equal opportunities to all pupils.

Whilst quantitative research demonstrates the existence of inequality based on advantage, qualitative studies have been used to explore how such inequality continues to operate. On the more selective end of the continuum, studies from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany have examined parental attitudes. Merry and Boterman (2020) and Lore et al. (2019) observe the high status held by the gymnasium (academically selective school) increases its desirability amongst highly educated, middle class parents. Such parents regard the gymnasium as an unquestioned, natural choice for their children. In the qualitative strand of their mixed methods study in Germany, Dumont et al. (2019) argue that highly educated parents have a presumption of gymnasium attendance for their children, observing a 'wordless understanding' of this presumption between teachers and highly educated parents (Dumont et al., 2019, p. 220).

Somewhat surprisingly, these outcomes are also echoed by studies based in Finland, a country whose education system is widely understood to lie towards the least selective end of the continuum. Despite having a comprehensive system, urban Finnish schools offer specialised curricula and classes that are accessed via aptitude tests (Kosunen & Seppänen, 2015). Kosunen et al. (2020, p. 1481) observe that membership of such classes

is more likely for pupils from wealthier socioeconomic backgrounds as the aptitude tests frequently assess skills and competencies that are developed in clubs and activities funded by parental economic capital, for example music lessons and sports clubs. As Seppänen et al. (2023, p. 196) observe, the resulting exclusion of some pupils from such opportunities frequently goes unseen, as advantage is often interpreted as talent, hard work or a combination of the two. Labelling such pupils as 'capable' leaves other pupils to consider themselves as 'ordinary' or 'loser' (Seppänen et al., 2023, p. 207).

Examining various international systems of academic selection reveals commonalities across the continuum. Firstly, the cohort of pupils who do not get selected are more likely to be pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Secondly, such inequality appears to go unseen as it appears as natural and beyond question. It is here that Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence comes into play.

Symbolic violence and recognising misrecognitions

The outcomes from qualitative research presented above align very smoothly with the conceptualisation of symbolic violence presented by Bourdieu and Passeron in *Reproduction* (1990). In them, we can see the symbolic power held by the dominant (middle class) group which positions them more favourably in the social space (or field) of education. This positioning is unquestioned to the point of going without saying as a result of the misrecognition of such symbolic power. The pupils are misrecognised as talented or hard working, rather than beneficiaries of the various forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) that relate to their positioning within the field. Not only does this allow the symbolic violence to continue, it also means that the unselected pupils (the dominated group) also accept their domination via self-blame. 'Meritocracy "common-sense"' (Bradbury, 2021, p. 8) operates as part of this misrecognition to categorise those who do not succeed on a presumed level playing field as being undeserving. These examples perfectly fit the following description of symbolic violence:

> a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely misrecognition) recognition, or even feeling'. (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 1–2)

Symbolic violence has therefore become established as a key theoretical concept to operate when exploring the relationship between repeated patterns of educational inequality and academically selective education. Complementing the international research discussed above, scholars within England (for example Louise et al., 2018; Thomson, 2014) have also used symbolic violence to explore the selective practice of setting, claiming that school-based selective practices also perpetuate the inequality of the dominant remaining dominant.

However, critical approaches to symbolic violence have argued that the concept itself is not beyond question. Jenkins (1992) argued that symbolic violence relies on a deterministic binary of dominant/dominated. In many ways, a presumably unintended consequence of the literature discussed above is that it supports a degree of such determinism. At risk of presenting an over-simplification, in the context of academically selective education the dominant middle-class pupil repeatedly dominates the working-class pupil. Scholars have expanded the scope of domination to incorporate gendered and

racialised dimensions (see for example Archer et al., 2007, 2017; Connolly et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2019) but regardless of how the distinction between dominant and dominated is conceptualised, such portrayal presents those in the dominated group as incapable of recognising the misrecognition they operate under. Bourdieu argues that this lack of recognition is part of symbolic violence:

> This submission is in no way a 'voluntary servitude' and this complicity is not granted by a conscious, deliberate act; it is itself the effect of a power, which is durably inscribed in the bodies of the dominated, in the forms of schemes of perception and dispositions (to respect, admire, love, etc.), in other words, beliefs which make one *sensitive* to certain public manifestations, such as public representations of power. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 171, original emphasis)

The 'durable inscription' therefore relates to structures operating at a level beyond individual consciousness. As the literature cited above has highlighted, symbolic violence provides a means of seeing such structures to those who know how to look for it. The positioning of the researcher as equipped with such knowledge falls in line with Burawoy's argument that Bourdieu and Passeron present symbolic violence as 'inaccessible to all but the initiated' (Burawoy, 2019, p. 194). Knowing what to look for and consequently revealing forms of social injustice via symbolic violence has now become an accepted practice within the sociology of education. This has resulted in a vast body of literature that has utilised a Bourdieusian approach to demonstrate incidents and patterns of symbolic violence and resulting social injustice.

Without denying the value of such literature, Thomson (2014, p. 101) argues that 'it is surely helpful to adopt a reflexive position which asks how our work might constitute a misrecognition'. Recent uses of symbolic violence have begun to examine its 'risky' side by raising the question of 'whether social agents are cultural dupes that neither recognize nor resist subordination' (Ergin et al., 2019, p. 133). This leads to the recognition that the binary of dominant/dominated, which is itself the foundational structure of symbolic violence, may well be a misrecognition that warrants exploration.

Watkins (2018) critiques the macro-view approach of symbolic violence, highlighting that it fails to take into account micro perspectives of individual capacitation. Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) make some tentative steps towards this and introduce the idea of 'relative failures' as a way of conceptualising those who are positioned more centrally in the dominant/dominated binary. However, despite recognising such positionality, Bourdieu and Champagne stop short of recognising capacitation or resistance. Instead they argue that the interviews recounted in *The Weight of the World* demonstrate that those positioned as relative failures are 'obliged to bluff nonstop, for others and for themselves, with a permanently flayed, wounded or mutilated self-image' (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999, p. 424). Not only do such individuals have to endure domination, they also have to lie to themselves and others about facing such domination.

Burawoy (2019, p. 16) describes the 'the Achilles heel of Bourdieu' as the capacity of the dominated to recognise symbolic violence and to understand the subjugation they consequently experience. Not only is this misrecognition recognisable in Bourdieu's writing on symbolic violence, it is also evident within literature that has subsequently utilised the concept to explore the perpetuation of social injustice within education systems. However, Bourdieu also makes an additional position on symbolic violence

clear, asserting 'it is quite illusory to think that symbolic violence can be overcome solely with the weapons of consciousness and will' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 180). Whilst academic literature has increased conscious awareness of symbolic violence, the relationship between symbolic violence and social injustice exists at a level that is not susceptible to conscious awareness alone. The realisation that countering social injustice is not an automatic consequence of identifying symbolic violence could help address a concern raised by Francis et al. (2017, p. 417):

> education academics concerned with social justice have often been less clear on what socially just education provision would look like.

Recognising misrecognitions means re-positioning the researcher and the researched. It means acknowledging that those within education may well be the best placed to advise on what education provision looks like, regardless of the degree to which it could be considered symbolically violent and/or socially unjust. An obvious perspective to gain would be that of those who have been previously (mis)recognised as experiencing symbolic violence. Doing so makes a space to consider both individual recognition of subjugation and a structural recognition of a problematic (rather than consequential) relationship between symbolic violence and social injustice.

The lived experiences of relative failures

Pupils living within academically selective areas of England encounter two different attainment measurements within their final year of primary school (age 10–11). In addition to the 11+, they also sit Key Stage 2 Standard Attainment Tests ('SATs') which are a statutory test undertaken by all pupils in England. In their study of the academically selective area of Slough, Schagen and Schagen (2001) identified a group of pupils who took but did not pass the 11+ but who scored highly on their SATs. I decided to focus my research on pupils who attend a non-academically selective school in an academically selective area as a result of not passing the 11+, but who have Key Stage 2 attainment which is considered to be 'high'. I recognised the alignment between such contradictory positioning and Bourdieu and Champagne's concept of the 'relative failure' (1999). Similar to relative failures, my conceptualisation of 'near-miss' pupils also acknowledges the pupils' positioning within an education system that 'keeps hold of those whom it excludes' (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999, p. 425).

Research specifically concerned with pupils' lived experiences of academically selective systems is scarce. Hajar's (2020, p. 476) recognition that 'very limited evidence exists regarding pupils' embodied experiences and reflections' on the academically selective system serves two purposes. It confirms the limitations of current research and provides the worked conceptualisation of lived experience (pupils' embodied experiences and reflections) that I followed.

To fully explore the lived experiences of near-miss pupils, it is necessary to acknowledge Bourdieu's claim that 'the real is the relational' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Such an approach recognises the relational interplay between the individual and elements of their social world. Bourdieu raises a compelling argument in terms of what such an approach can reveal:

> People are not fools; they are much less bizarre or deluded than we would spontaneously believe precisely because they have internalized, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective choices they face. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 130)

The exploration of what constitutes the 'protracted and multisided process' can be revealed via a relational exploration of how lived experiences demonstrate lived relations (McNay, 2004, p. 185). One way of investigating this relationship is to explore how symbolic violence operates, using the tools of pedagogic action, pedagogic authority and pedagogic work (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As can be seen in the analysis which follows, pedagogic work relies on the 'search for recognition' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 165). Archer et al. (2020, p. 354) demonstrate how the academically selective practice of setting is a form of pedagogic work that allows such recognition to be 'achieved through the explicit and implicit practices of schooling'. Pedagogic authority also operates to justify recognition achieved through the pedagogic work. This is succinctly described by Bourdieu and Passeron as 'preach[ing] to the converted' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 25) and this analogy is useful when considering why and how those who experience symbolic violence appear to accept it. As Archer and colleagues demonstrate (2020, p. 355), the pedagogic authority of setting stems from its relationship to a legitimised culture of meritocracy which their pupil participants were aware of not only from educational experience, but also from experiences in other social fields. Therefore, it is vital to consider the various social fields near-miss pupils operate within and how experiences within and across social fields relate to their lived experiences of academically selective education. Further, having highlighted the misrecognitions operating in relation to symbolic violence and social injustice, I also examine the extent to which such misrecognitions are recognisable within a relational analysis of pupils' lived experiences. This leads to the following questions:

(1) What is the relationship between symbolic violence and the lived experiences of near-miss pupils?
(2) To what extent do the lived experiences of near-miss pupils demonstrate misrecognition of symbolic violence?

Researching the 'ordinary suffering' within pupils' lived experiences

In the introductory chapter to *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu issues the following guidance:

> using material poverty as the sole measure of all suffering keeps us from seeing and understanding a whole side of the suffering characteristic of a social order which has . . . set up the conditions for an unprecedented development of all kinds of ordinary suffering. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 4)

Therefore, the exploration of ordinary suffering was one of the key aims of my research design. I used established contacts to gain access to Hillside school (a pseudonym), a non-academically selective school in an academically selective area of South-East England. Although minimal information can be provided about Hillside to maintain its anonymity, it had a percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals that was broadly in line with the

national average. I made the decision early on in the research design not to include free school meal eligibility or pupil ethnicity data as sampling criteria. I made such a decision for two reasons. Firstly, by disregarding pupils' socioeconomic and ethnicity status, I had an opportunity to explore symbolic violence in a way that was different to the established pattern of disadvantaged = dominated. Secondly, I hoped that by not focusing entirely on a taken for granted suffering resulting from disadvantage, I would be able to meet Bourdieu's request of making space for points of view that are exposed to ordinary suffering (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 5). My interest lay in how the pupils themselves identified and conceptualised suffering.

My focus was on the ordinary suffering encountered by pupils who could be classified as near-miss pupils. I purposively sampled participants on the basis of being the highest ranking pupils within their respective year groups according to their Key Stage 2 attainment. Institutional ethical approval was granted and informed consent was obtained from the pupils and their parents. I began field work in January 2020, working initially with Boris and Poppy (pseudonyms, both aged 18, in their final year of school) and Gaby (pseudonym, aged 16, in year 11 of school). My original intention was to extend the sample and include another pupil in year 11 and additional pupils from younger year groups. However, school closures resulting from COVID-19 brought my fieldwork to an abrupt halt in March 2020. My sample is therefore limited to three participants and whilst this can be considered as a limitation, I regard my decision to remain with a small sample to be justifiable. Whilst switching to online research became an established method as the pandemic disruptions continued, I was not comfortable continuing with the fieldwork given the uncertainty schools, pupils and their families faced in the first few weeks after school closures.

The approach to data collection used observations and participant-led creation of online collages to shape interview discussions. This approach centred the pupil participants as the 'experts in their own lives' (Clark & Moss, 2017, p. 20). My unit of analysis were narratives which emerged thematically across the interviews, aligning with Bourdieu's recognition of narratives having the capacity to 'articulate the deepest structures of the social world and their contradictions' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511). I explored the complex and interwoven series of relationships between the individual pupil and the subjective and objective structures within their lived experiences. The pupils' experiences were considered relationally, recognising their concurrent positioning within multiple fields. Bathmaker (2015) observes the potential complexity of drawing up field boundaries, suggesting the consideration of blurred boundaries and sub-fields operating within fields. I therefore focused my relational analysis on how certain rules operate within a field or sub-field to provide structure (and at times strategic direction) to play by whilst remaining dynamic.

As the narratives draw directly from the pupils' lived experiences, they make direct reference to elements of English secondary education such as standardised testing at age 16 ('GCSE') and 18 ('A Level'). The narratives provided below were established through trustworthiness, authenticity and resonance rather than through generalisability in relation to an objective truth (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In agreement with Clandinin & Rosiek (2007, 46) the potential uncertainty such an analytical process could create is regarded as a 'trade-off' for the 'proximity to ordinary lived experience and the scope of . . . considerations' which this analytical approach has facilitated.

The simultaneous deficit and affluence of academic selection

Academic selection was firmly established as part of the way things are in education for Boris, Gaby and Poppy. This narrative explores the 11+ as the most explicit form of academic selection encountered by the pupils but also considers other forms of academic selection that Boris, Gaby and Poppy had encountered such as university entrance criteria, standardised testing (SATs tests, GCSE and A level exams) and internal testing practices in Hillside.

Boris, Gaby and Poppy all drew upon a conceptualisation of deficit when describing their 11+ failure. In his first interview, Boris spoke about being 'put down' to Hillside, rather than 'put up' to the grammar school. This perception of being disadvantageously positioned within the sub-field of academically selective education as a result of lacking the institutionalised cultural capital of an 11+ pass was also evident in Gaby's comment:

> What was wrong with me that I didn't pass? Like, were those people better than me?. (Gaby Interview 1)

As a form of pedagogic work, the 11+ meets the criterion of exhaustiveness by reproducing the principles of the cultural arbitrary (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 34). It provided a clear delineation between two groups of pupils, those who passed and those who failed. Boris and Gaby recognised the pedagogic authority of the 11 + . Despite being a sorting mechanism only used within the sub-field of academically selective education, that legitimacy of the pedagogic authority it transmitted was designated as worthy on the basis of it being transmitted (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 22). In other words, the 11+ made sense to the pupils as it aligned with an established practice of using tests to measure academic attainment. However, the pupils did not blindly accept testing and did at times call its pedagogic authority into question. This is best explored using the criteria of durability and transposability and which are provided by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), pp. 33–34) as additional indicators of the productivity of pedagogic work.

The durability of the 11+ as a form of pedagogic work was called into question by the pupils. They frequently acknowledged that the 11+ could be proved wrong by subsequent experiences of academic selection. For Gaby, a subsequent experience occurred within months of her 11+, whilst she was still in her final year of primary school:

> In Maths we had a leader board with our [attainment] levels on. And I remember this girl being at the bottom and she was one of the only kids in our set to actually pass the 11 + . And I was thinking 'she's a whole level lower than me and she passed, and I didn't?' . . . Like how does that work? (Gaby, Interview 1)

By drawing attention to an apparent discrepancy between the 11+ and attainment levels measured by the Key Stage 2 SATs, Gaby calls the durability of the 11+ into question. She also recognises a limitation to its value in the wider field of education where, unlike the Key Stage 2 SATs, it is not as widely recognised. Poppy acknowledges how her lived experiences beyond the 11+ altered her perspective:

> At the time I feel like [passing the 11+] would have made me feel smarter, at least initially. But feeling confidence in how clever you are and stuff, I feel like that changes. (Poppy, Interview 2)

In a later interview, Poppy identified that her high attainment at GCSE was a contributing factor to this change:

> The way I see it is that even though I went to this school, my [GCSE] grades say I'm smart . . . But even if you did get good grades and you went here, it was more of a 'oh wow, you got that and you went to that school?' It's kind of like people expect you to not get those grades. They don't say 'Oh, you're not that clever' but just them saying they didn't expect that from you because you didn't go to a grammar school is still the same mindset'. (Poppy, Interview 3)

Within this example, Poppy recognises her concurrent positioning in the field of education and the sub-field of academically selective education. She acknowledges the institutionalised cultural capital she holds in the form of GCSE results, articulating how their value within the field of education counters her positioning in the academically selective sub-field. Pedagogic work is considered by Bourdieu and Passeron to have 'a function of keeping order' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 40). This is evident in Poppy's description of the questioning and surprised reactions she encounters. Poppy held an amount of institutionalised cultural capital which had potential to disrupt the order within the sub-field of academically selective education, but the disruption was minimised through the questioning she encountered. Although Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 19) state that pedagogic authority is 'not reducible to a pure and simple relation of communication', being placed on the receiving end of such questioning reinforces Poppy's recognition of herself as not aligning with the way things are. This then serves to enforce her misrecognition of herself being in a deficit position, despite her awareness of the value of the institutionalised cultural capital she possesses.

Boris questioned the transposability of exam results (in this instance, A level results) as a form of institutionalised cultural capital:

> Let's say I got A, B, B or something . . . On paper I might look smarter than someone else, but they might have skills that can't be represented on paper. (Boris Interview 3)

By making this comparison between the value of 'results on paper' and skills and experiences which do not align with such measurement, Boris demonstrates his awareness of the rules of the metaphorical game he is a participant in. He recognises the relationship between field and capital by identifying a potential weakness in exam results (the 'A, B, B' he describes) in that their value does not always transpose across all social fields. This allows him to be critical of the game at play within the field of education, in which individuals lacking in the capital most valued within the field (the institutionalised cultural capital of exam results) were disadvantaged despite such individuals possessing forms of capital (skills not measurable 'on paper') which would be valued in alternative fields. Such awareness positions Boris as an informed participant. He is aware of the rules of the game changing according to the field in which the game is being played. This awareness means he is able to simultaneously hold two perceptions of academic selection. Boris recognises it as a fundamental rule of the game within education but is also aware that the value of the capital gained by playing by such a rule will not remain constant when transposed to other fields.

Awareness of the rules of the game aligned to academic selection also meant that the pupils recognised occasions when they considered themselves to be more advantageously

positioned within social fields. Boris had a keen interest in sport (notably athletics) which he references in the following comment:

> If I'd gone [to grammar school], I wouldn't have had that opportunity to do those events, to do all my athletics, to be able to go to districts as well. (Boris, Interview 4)

Boris openly acknowledged that a lack of competition at Hillside had provided him with opportunities for athletics participation and anticipates that he would have encountered competition for such opportunities at a grammar school. Gaby makes a similar observation when talking about her positioning as top set pupil at Hillside:

> I definitely know that here in class if I do something well, I'll get recognised for it but also I know how my friends in the bottom set feel about being like labelled as that . . . Maybe if I went to a grammar school I would be that bottom set and I don't really wanna feel what they're feeling. (Gaby Interview 3)

Gaby's awareness of her positioning within the sub-field of Hillside allowed her to evaluate the affluence she held as top set pupil against the potential deficit she would hold as a bottom set grammar school pupil. Although Gaby's evaluation was contingent on a presumption that she would have been bottom set at a grammar school, she also demonstrates an understanding of how academic selection operates as a positioning mechanism. Gaby and Boris's experiences link back to the conceptualisation of 'relative failures' (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999) as they both identify how they have benefited from academic selection. However, in contrast to non-stop bluffing (1999, 424) their awareness of the rules of the game allows them to pragmatically consider their concurrent affluence and deficit.

As near-miss pupils, Boris, Gaby and Poppy present interesting perspectives on academic selection. All three were able to identify instances of the various forms of academic selection they had encountered and how they perceived it to have placed them in simultaneous situations of deficit and affluence. Although academic selection was experienced by the pupils in specific forms, there is a clear link between each form and the pupils' recognition of academic selection as an aspect of the way things are in education that meant it went without saying. This did not mean that Boris, Gaby and Poppy were not able to see and criticise elements of academically selective education. Instead, their lived experiences demonstrate their reflexive awareness of how academic selection operated as a rule of the game.

(Mis)recognising inequality and working hard

This narrative explores how Boris, Gaby and Poppy recognised and misrecognised inequalities perpetuated by the academically selective system they were part of. It examines how the pupils drew on lived experiences within and beyond the sub-field of academically selective education and the wider field of education. The pupils' conceptualisation of working hard plays a central role in both their recognitions and misrecognitions.

Boris, Gaby and Poppy all spoke about their awareness of inequalities which they considered to be related to the academically selective system. They frequently referred to tangible items such as school trips and iPads which they claimed to be much more prevalent at the grammar school than at Hillside. In addition, they also mentioned non-

tangible items such as dispositions. Boris related the following experience of a group interview for a part time position at a local department store:

> There was a girl from [grammar school] that was with me and some other people. So, we were all sitting around a table and they would give a scenario and the way she answered the questions made me think like 'she's got the job already' whereas I would say the same answer as her but you have to say it in a certain way or you have to present it in a certain way ... I think it's the whole structure and the environment that they get put in helps them survive in the outside, in the real world. (Boris, Interview Two)

Boris perceives the contrast between the apparent ease the grammar school pupil displayed and his own 'fish out of water' feelings. He identifies that the disadvantage he considered himself to be under in comparison to the grammar school pupil was attributable to the style, rather than the content of their answers. The interview scenario appeared to Boris to align much more smoothly with the habitus of the grammar school pupil compared to his own. His recognition of the 'certain way' of speaking, demonstrates Boris's understanding that forms of capital obtainable (and according to him, instilled) within grammar schools can be transferred across to advantageous positioning in alternative fields. For Boris, a consequence of the academically selective system was exposing those in a privileged position to practices and dispositions that were of value in fields beyond education.

The pupils recognised working hard as one of the dispositions inculcated by the grammar school. Poppy drew the following distinction between herself and her friends who attended a grammar school:

> It's just like they're under so much pressure to get these good results, so they do all this work and then they obviously get the results they deserve ... We don't have that pressure which is a good thing, but it's also a bad thing cos we don't have that reputation of a good work ethic. Everyone knows the right work ethic is so important. (Poppy Interview 3)

Poppy's recognition of the grammar school reputation creating a 'work ethic' that ultimately leads to exam results that justify the reputation demonstrates a continual reinforcement of pedagogic authority. She highlights that this reputation becomes attributed to an individual, recognising a good work ethic as an unquestionable rule of the game. Gaby's reflection demonstrates similar unquestioning acceptance, but also questions certain assumptions:

> I always found schoolwork important. Like I just know that I need to get it done to move on and it is necessary ... It gets me places ... It's just weird that people assume I don't work hard cos I'm here [Hillside]. Someone attends a grammar school you think 'oh they must be really intelligent and hard working' ... like the uni you attend could be better than Oxford or Cambridge in your course but ... that stuff, you don't acknowledge it. You've kinda got to prove yourself. (Gaby, Interview 3)

For Gaby, being a Hillside pupil meant that she perceived herself as encountering a different set of pre-suppositions than pupils at grammar schools based on their school's reputation. Boris concisely described this as 'the badge sticks' (Boris, Interview 2). Bourdieu and Passeron explain that pedagogic work implicitly 'presupposes, produces and inculcates ... ideologies', making specific reference to the 'ideology of the "gift"' and its application to the distribution of pupils into 'sub-populations academically and socially hierarchized by type of establishment' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 52–53).

The extent to which the ideology of giftedness is inculcated within the pedagogic work of academic selection was made obvious by the pupils' description of school reputation as an assumption which could be proved wrong. Gaby's comment demonstrates the cultural capital she possessed in her understanding of university ranking systems. However, she also recognises that this is not adequate to overturn the pedagogic authority of academic selection. Instead, she misrecognises that the responsibility to prove assumptions wrong remains with her.

The acceptance of the responsibility for hard work led to an implicit form of academic selection, in which the pupils justified self-exclusion on the basis of either not working hard enough or by considering a specific practice as 'not for me'. This was most evident in an incident recounted by Poppy, where she explained her decision not to accept an offer from a prestigious university:

I had an offer from [name of university] that I really wanted to go to, and they lowered it down from ABB to BBB, but I don't think I'm going to get those grades . . . So I kind of took that into consideration as well. I feel like if I'd worked hard from the beginning, I would have been able to reach it but because I didn't really take that route then that's my fault.

Self-blame went along with Poppy's recognition of individual responsibility for working hard. Thus, in addition to explicit exclusion, academic selection also operated implicitly, rendering Poppy as a 'prisoner' of limitations which were unconsciously enforced by self-discipline and self-censorship whilst she lived out her practice 'in the illusion of freedom and universality' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 40). The misrecognition of meritocracy meant that success was achievable as long as you worked hard enough. Along with this, individualised self-blame pointed its accusatory finger back at the individual when success was not achieved and responsibility for overcoming any inequality was assumed by the individual. Awareness of inequality often went hand in hand with criticisms of it and the structures which appeared to perpetuate it. Whist such criticality was not sufficient to overturn inequality, it did go some way to enhance the pupils' reflexivity. As McNay (1999), pp. 110–111) observes, 'reflexive awareness is predicated on a distanciation of the subject with constitutive structures'.

Such distancing helps to reveal the 'implicit logic of practice, expectations and relations of those operating in these fields' (Deer, 2014, p. 117). For Boris, Gaby and Poppy part of their 'pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 68) was the recognition of inequality and of hard work as a means of overcoming it. In addition to this being viewed as a misrecognition contributing to symbolic violence, it can also be re-framed as an alignment between the practice of the pupils and the rules of the game within the field of education. In a critique of the concept of symbolic violence, Watkins (2018, p. 49) argues that rather than being a 'conduit for class domination', certain knowledge 'transcends class boundaries pertinent to understanding the world and to effective engagement within it'. Conscious awareness of the existence of the game, in addition to its rules, offered Boris, Gaby and Poppy some (albeit in certain instances, limited) 'agentic potential', which Watkins (2018, p. 51) claims Bourdieu assigns a 'minimal role' to. Boris, Gaby and Poppy utilised such potential but did so in accordance with the rules of the game. They were able to recognise how the 'cultural arbitrary' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 5) operated within the field of education but also how this operation related to alternative fields. This recognition was facilitated through their own

reflexive thinking which revealed how their subjective experiences related to their recognition of and success within the objective structure of academic selection. The focus in this analysis on how such mechanisms operate has been sharpened by the consideration of how recognitions and misrecognitions are produced and sustained, rather than reifying them as pre-existing and subsequently, deterministic (Watkins, 2018, pp. 56–57). Boris, Gaby and Poppy were able to reflexively identify the relationship between inequality and hard work as one of the rules of the game within the field of education. Such reflexivity meant that they simultaneously recognised and misrecognised the social injustices perpetuated by this relationship.

Questioning what we think we know

I draw this paper to a close by returning to the research questions. Putting the relationship between symbolic violence and the pupils' lived experiences under scrutiny revealed instances of recognition and misrecognition of symbolic violence. Boris, Gaby and Poppy pre-reflexively accepted academic selection as a rule of the game and consequently misrecognised symbolic violence. However, their reflexive recognition of how the rules of the game operated presented them with a means of playing the game accordingly. This presents a paradox, which Bourdieu speaks of below in relation to what he terms 'popular culture':

> Resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating. Such is the paradox of the dominated and there is no way out of it. (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 155)

This paradox has clear links to the pupils' lived experiences. Their understanding of hard work as one of the rules of the game recognised resistance to domination as potentially alienating. That is, they knew the option to not work hard would negatively affect their positioning within the field of education as well as other fields. Recognising potential alienation constituted part of their understanding of the rules of the game which in turn supported their submission, based on their perception of how such submission could provide liberation. Working hard would result in good grades that could go some way to counter the domination Boris, Gaby and Poppy had experienced within the field of academically selective education. They resisted domination by intentionally complying with the dominant.

As Lawler (2004, p. 122) acknowledges 'it is not that people lack agency; rather there is no "innocent" position: no resistance that is not in some way complicitous with power'. Examining the relationship between symbolic violence and the lived experiences of Boris, Gaby and Poppy reveals both resistance and complicity. Whilst this does not completely challenge Bourdieu and Passeron's conceptualisation of symbolic violence, it does make evident that viewing symbolic violence at an individual, micro level can foreground complexities that are not visible at a macro, structural level. Engaging with such complexities re-positioned the pupils, highlighting their capacity to recognise misrecognitions.

Recognising misrecognitions brings me to the second research question of this paper. Examining the lived experiences of Boris, Gaby and Poppy meant recognising my own misrecognition, which went as follows: symbolic violence is something that can be revealed via the application of Bourdieu's thinking tools by an individual who is positioned with the requisite knowledge to apply them. This

provides a means of facilitating social justice via the emancipation of those who fall victim to symbolic violence. My anticipation partly transpired, and the pupils' lived experiences demonstrated the ways in which symbolic violence resulting from an academically selective education system played out in their everyday lives. However, the subsequent step of this demonstration equating to social justice is where my misrecognition became apparent. My decision not to adopt the established disadvantaged = dominated view allowed me to see evidence of capacitation and resistance within the pupils' lived experiences. This positioned them as something other than a victim in need of emancipation. Whilst this outcome could be interpreted as a partial counter to the established charges of symbolic violence that are held up to academically selective education systems, I would consider such interpretation overly simplistic. However, following a demand from James (2015, p. 109), as a critical social researcher I consider this outcome to be a way of putting my assumptions under scrutiny.

Reflexively identifying my misrecognition has been challenging. As Grenfell and James (2004, p. 518) observe, 'it is perhaps a truism to state that no-one ever thanks you for pointing out misrecognitions'. Engaging with the complexities of the pupils' lived experiences required me to move beyond conceptualising them as being in need of the sociology of education to emancipate them from social injustice. To this extent, I suggest an implication for future research is the recognition that acting in the interests of social justice requires a willingness to engage critically with its conceptualisation. Questions should be asked concerning what social justice equates to in the particular research context, rather than merely replicating the established patterns of misrecognition. Within this research context, Boris, Gaby and Poppy had found some means of capacitation from the symbolic violence of the academically selective system. For the pupils, social justice was not served solely by recognising such symbolic violence. It also required recognition of the misrecognitions operating within what we think we know.

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