Refusing expectation? Class, masculinity and selfhood in a longitudinal analysis of young men's educational transitions/ trajectories, age 10-22

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Abstract

Extensive research discusses how young people's educational 'choices' and trajectories are implicated in the reproduction of social inequalities. This paper addresses three key gaps, adding to: (i) the paucity of qualitative longitudinal studies of young people's trajectories; (ii) understanding of young people who 'go against the grain' of social reproduction in classed/ gendered ways, and (iii) the role of subjectivity within young people's negotiations of their trajectories. It employs a Bourdieusian lens, analyzing 22 longitudinal interviews conducted with two white young men, Buddy (middle-class) and Hedgehog (working-class), and their parents, over an 11-year period, from age 10-22. It discusses how family socialisation practices worked on and through subjectivity to cultivate a disposition towards 'responsible' (white, classed) masculinity that supported social reproduction and constrained their pursuit of arts trajectories. Transgression was facilitated through experiences of habitus clivé and the young men's agentic leveraging of societal discourses around neoliberalism and self-actualisation. It is suggested that subjectivity is a key site for young people's transition work that is implicated in both reproductive and transformative pathways. Implications for policy include challenging dominant human capital and rational action assumptions within education and careers policy and practice and providing greater understanding and support for transgressive trajectories.

Keywords: Trajectory, class, gender/masculinity, choices, Bourdieu

Transitions as a practice of social reproduction

Sociology of education research has long sought to understand young people's educational trajectories/ transitions and how practices of 'choice' and 'aspiration' are implicated in the re/production of **s**ocial inequalities (Tarabini and Jacovkis 2020). Such work explains how educational transitions commonly involve processes of social selectivity (Blossfeld and Shavit 2011) that channel young people into differentiated routes and outcomes that are patterned by class, gender, race (and so on), as detailed by empirical work on transitions between educational stages, such as from primary to secondary (Green 2010; Tarabini et al., 2021), school to higher education (Gale and Parker 2015; Reay et al., 2001; Archer et al. 2003) and education to work (Alexander et al. 2022; Hutchinson and Kettlewell 2015).

The theory of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1980, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) provides a particularly useful lens for understanding how young people's educational choices and transitions are not 'free' or 'neutral' but constitute a technology of social reproduction. In short, Bourdieu proposes that the *field* of education reproduces relations of privilege and oppression through its interaction with, and differential valuing of, *habitus* (internalised, socialised structures of disposition that are structured by experience and, in turn, shape an individual's views and engagement with the world) and *capital* (cultural, social, economic and symbolic resources). The field accords the highest status and value to the knowledge, values, interests and ways of being of the dominant, which in turn translates into forms of social advantage (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Hence young people's educational aspirations and 'choices' can be

understood as socially cultivated and produced phenomena (Gale and Parker 2015) that bear the imprint of social inequalities (Archer & Yamashita 2003).

For instance, studies show how within schools, the lack of value accorded to non-dominant forms of capital, combined with marginalised communities' unequal access to dominant forms of capital , makes it difficult for students from less affluent families to become socially mobile and realise their aspirations (Gale and Parker 2015; Reay et al., 2001). Research also shows how subordinated habitus is acted on by the field to inculcate acceptance of its disadvantaged positioning, encouraging a young person to "adjust their aspirations to their objective chances" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 110), such as coming to see middle-class routes as undesirable and/or unobtainable (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 98).

The socio-political-historical particularities of the field (Hörschelmann 2011) shape the boundaries of possibility and desirability for young people's aspirations and trajectories. For instance, in Global North contexts, neoliberal education systems structure what is thinkable and achievable for differently socially located individuals, determining whose habitus and capital are valued. As Ball et al (2002, p.69) discuss, "deeply normalised grammars of aspiration" are prevalent within education policy discourse, in which dominant educational routes (such as the 'gold standard' of university degrees) are valued and legitimised, over and above other forms of tertiary vocational training and employment (Sellar & Gale 2011). Trajectories are not only located and produced within the education field but are negotiated across multiple fields, including home/family. As Pallas (2003) explains 'educational trajectories ought not be studied in isolation from other social institutions ... because such roles are intertwined in complex ways' (Pallas 2003, p.170). For instance, Lareau (2003) details how classed family practices produce differential trajectories, in which deviations and transgressions from social reproduction are

closed down. In sum, research shows how the interaction of habitus, capital and field contributes to keeping working-class students 'in place' and that while many young people might consider their choices and trajectories as natural products of individual interest and agency (Tarabini et al 2021), they are heavily socially patterned across time and context, thanks to the powerful forces of social reproduction.

While Bourdieu's work primarily foregrounds how educational practices contribute to the reproduction of class inequality, feminist and postcolonial scholars such as Skeggs (2003) and Wallace (2023) have extended his ideas to consider intersectional forms of habitus and capital, and the reproduction of gendered, classed and racialised inequalities. For instance, Reay et al. (2001) show how interactions of habitus and capital produce classed, gendered and racialized patterns of degree choice (see also Archer et al., 2003). Hence this paper adds to research that applies an intersectional Bourdieusian lens to understanding young people's educational trajectories.

Research gaps: longitudinal studies, 'going against the grain' and subjectivity

This paper contributes to three key gaps within existing critical sociological research on young people's trajectories. First, it seeks to address the empirical /methodological paucity of qualitative longitudinal studies of young people's trajectories. Perhaps unsurprisingly due to the substantial time and funding required for longitudinal work, the majority of empirical studies on transitions rely on cross-sectional or retrospective approaches. While all data are socially constructed and partial, the 'messy' and non-linear aspects of trajectories are particularly susceptible to being forgotten, 'ironed out' and/or re-worked through cross-sectional interviews (McLeod 2010). Hence this paper responds to calls for more longitudinal work to help shed light

on how trajectories are characterised by change, liminality, non-linearity and discontinuity (Erstad 2015), to "better capture the precariousness, unpredictability and diversity of life courses" (Hörschelmann 2011, p.379).

Second, the paper seeks to address the relative paucity of research focused on young people who 'go against the grain' of social reproduction, i.e. those who achieve upward or downward social mobility (Archer et al., 2023). It adds to the existing small body of work in this area, such as Reay et al.'s (2009) study of white working-class students accessing elite universities, which showed how these young people tend to be determined, single-minded, academically focused individuals who often experience a sense of dissociation and 'cleft habitus' (*habitus clivé)* on encountering the elite university field. It also builds on Archer et al.'s, (2023) analysis of how 'lucky' access to dominant forms of social and cultural capital supported working-class students' access to university and young women's entry into non-gender traditional routes.

Third, the paper aims to contribute to understanding the role of subjectivity within young people's negotiations of transgressive trajectories. While Bourdieu recognises the capacity of the habitus for reflexivity and structured agency, this remains arguably underexplored in comparison to his focus on how habitus is structured by power relations and practices within fields. The paper thus responds to calls for greater consideration of how trajectories are "produced through discourses of subjectivity" (Hörschelmann (2011, p.380), recognising that young people's educational choices are negotiated through both personal and parental subjectivities (Saifer and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2017). That is, individual 'choices' are always made through the consideration and influence of others (Heinz 2002; Bailey et al. 2004), rendering trajectories relational, rather than individual, achievements (Hörschelmann (2011). Trajectory work also

requires emotional capital (Reay 2004) and can be psychologically demanding, taking a toll on individual subjectivity (Green 2010; Spernes 2020). However, to date little work has explored how subjectivity may be implicated in the production of transgressive trajectories. This paper thus contributes to intersectional Bourdieusian work on transitions through an analysis of longitudinal data from white working-class and middle-class young men and their parents, attending to interplays of youth and parental subjectivity within trajectory negotiations in an attempt to shed light on what enabled these young men to go against expectation to pursue arts trajectories. In particular, the paper asks:

- What supported/ constrained the young men's aspirations and attempts to go against the grain of social reproduction to pursue an arts trajectory?
- What role did the young men's intersectional subjectivity play in the production and negotiation of their trajectories into/ away from the arts?
- What role did families play in supporting or closing down transgressive trajectories?

Longitudinally researching young people's educational trajectories

Various terms have been used to refer to the routes that young people navigate through education and work, including transitions, trajectories, and pathways (Pallas, 2003). Some writers use the terms synonymously and/or interchangeably, whereas others point to theoretical distinctions between them, with respective affordances and limitations. For instance, Pallas argues that trajectories and pathways both involve a sequence of transitions but proposes that they are analytically distinct due to respectively foregrounding individual versus systemic foci. This paper applies a Bourdieusian lens to longitudinal interviews, maintaining a dual focus on both structure (as enacted through intersectional interactions of habitus, capital and field) and its

interplay (negotiation/ resistance) through individual and parental subjectivity. Hence the terms trajectory, transition and pathway are used interchangeably.

The paper considers two case study young men ('Buddy' and 'Hedgehog') who tried to go against gendered, classed expectations to pursue an arts trajectory. A case study analysis has been chosen as this aligns with an interpretive commitment to honouring participants' complex, time-constructed accounts (Baxter and Jack 2008). The cases are drawn from a wider mixed methods longitudinal study of young people's aspirations and trajectories that conducted over 740 longitudinal interviews, tracking 50 young people and their parents/carers from age 10-22. The project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant number ES/SO1599X/1, sought to generate an in-depth understanding of the factors shaping and producing young people's aspirations and trajectories over time. As Hermanowicz (2013) explains, longitudinal qualitative interviews, while not 'new', are not common - yet they are valuable for examining meaning-making within participants' accounts over time.

Participants were originally recruited through a nationally representative sample of primary schools, with parents volunteering themselves and their children to take part. Young people were interviewed at six time points: at the end of primary school (age 10/11), through compulsory secondary education (at ages 12/13, 13/14, 15/16) and at ages 17/18 and 20/21. Parents/carers were interviewed at five time points (excluding age 12/13). Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, with young people interviewed at school/college and parents at home, although all interviews at age 20/21 were conducted virtually due to the global pandemic and UK lockdowns. Parental and older youth interviews typically lasted around 1.5 hours. Earlier interviews with young people were shorter (30 minutes to one hour). Interviews were conducted by 14 members of the wider project research team over the eleven period, including the paper

author. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by a paid professional transcriber. Participants chose their own pseudonyms, which are honored in this paper. All interviews were collected in line with the ethical code of the British Educational Research Association (2024), ensuring free and informed consent (and the right to withdraw data) and complying with UK data protection legislation for data treatment and storage. The study was approved by UCL Research Ethics committee.

Buddy and Hedgehog's cases were selected as examples of young people whose trajectories ended up going against family expectation in gender/class atypical ways. Analysis was theory-led. Each young person's interview transcripts were combined and summarised into a chronological extended case study that was agreed by team members. Any inconsistencies were retained, as these are understood to constitute normal narrative occurrences that can offer insights into the contested ways in which identities and trajectories are produced. Analysis mapped how aspirations, choices and routes were articulated and negotiated by parents and young people over time. Constructions of identity, subjectivity, gender/masculinity and subject and occupational fields were identified and explored, considering interplays of identity and capital within the young men's trajectories.

The longitudinal interview approach yielded productive insights into the non-linear nature of the young men's trajectories and the production of these, across time-space, through negotiated family practices and dynamics. Conducting repeat interviews over an eleven-year period may also have helped facilitate a level of trust and familiarity between researchers and participants that supported the generation of rich accounts. However, the methodology also entailed various limitations and challenges. For instance, the absence of school observations and teacher interviews may have underplayed the role of the educational practices within

participants' trajectories. Hedgehog's mother was not interviewed and the fewer number of interviews conducted with Buddy's mother, Naomi, may lend disproportionate weight to the views of fathers. Finally, the volume of data produced through longitudinal interviews can make analysis challenging due to the 'noise' of extensive detail.

The following section presents case study summaries of Buddy and Hedgehog. While these are necessarily shortened from the original interviews, they are still relatively long and detailed and deliberately contain many direct quotations. The rationale for presenting each extended case study separately (rather than through a combined thematic analysis) reflects the project team's commitment to honoring the lives, humanity and voices of longitudinal case study participants. Longitudinal interviews are necessarily extensive and complex, being produced and negotiated across time and context - extended case studies can help convey the unique positionality of participants and resist the impetus towards 'neat' reductionism in interpretation. The case studies also attempt to provide sufficient material to invite readers into interpretation, to help open up interpretations for challenge/ discussion. Hence, each case is presented in turn, followed by a combined analysis and discussion section that considers insights and implications for theory, policy and practice.

Buddy and Hedgehog

Buddy

Buddy is a White British young man whose family live in London. His father, Michael, a lawyer, was first-in-family to attend university. His mother, Naomi, took a career break to raise the children and later entered management consulting. After primary school, Buddy attended a

selective, independent single-sex secondary school and went on to study history at a prestigious university. At age 21, he was hoping to pursue a career in film or theatre production.

Age 10/11

At primary school, Buddy loved drama and described himself' as "a good actor". He also liked English and history. He felt he was a good school student and got "fairly good exam results". Buddy described himself as a "bit different" to other boys at school because he did not "muck around", a point that both parents agreed on, describing Buddy as "studious", "very responsible" and a "mini" version of Michael, on account of being "very caring", "very sensitive" and with a "very strong moral compass". As Michael explained, "[Buddy]'s always very measured, he always seems quite grown up ...very cerebral, bookish".

When asked about his aspirations for the future, Buddy thought he might follow his father into law but didn't feel pressured to do so ("I think he's just going to let me figure that out. He doesn't like pressing things on me"). Michael recognised that "it's still in the very early stages" but reflected at length whether Buddy would do "something completely different or ... something the same" as his own career:

> "One of my old silly jokes was I would always say that [Buddy] was going to be a dancer so that was my way of saying that he was going to do something completely opposite to what I do. So those are diametrically opposed. But ... and it's probably projection on my part, I can see him being a lawyer".

While Michael said that he wanted Buddy to "make up his mind and to follow his heart in some weird romantic way", he also wanted him to pursue law ("it's a sort of affirmation or something if your child ends up doing what it is that you do").

Age 12-14

Buddy enjoyed secondary school, making "friends with everybody" and attaining "especially good" grades. He enjoyed modern history and attended film-making club and drama school in his spare time. Around age 13, like most children in England, Buddy chose a limited set of subjects to study from age 14-16, culminating in the national high stakes compulsory GCSE examinations (General Certificate of Secondary Education). Buddy chose drama, as acting was one of his "passions". Naomi wanted Buddy to study a modern foreign language instead but conceded that drama was "the one thing that's come from him that he has a passion for that he really wants to do ... so... we decided to let him go down that road and he's very happy". Buddy achieved parts in school plays and an independent film, which grew his passion further. As Naomi reflected, drama was "the one thing" that they, as parents, had not pushed and was "completely off his own back".

For a while, Michael tried to encourage Buddy to consider the armed forces ("I would say to him 'You should join the navy' that was always my thing"). While Buddy did join army cadets, his main aspirations at this age were towards psychiatry (inspired by the books his father was reading at the time) or becoming an actor, reflecting his ongoing "passion for acting" ("a fire raging in him", Naomi). Yet Buddy also worried that acting was "a very shaky career to choose", because "you can do one very good thing and then nothing". He reflected that "as much as I like History, I don't see myself becoming a historian, because I don't see it as very profitable". Buddy followed parental advice to concentrate on "academic subjects" at GCSE and A Level, with a view to exploring the "really extensive" extracurricular drama experiences on offer at university. While Naomi recognised that to follow one's passion "must be an amazing thing", she also worried about the financial viability of acting ("he needs to be able to earn enough

money to look after himself ... it's great to have this passion ... but you need to be able to eat good food"). She aspired for Buddy to be both happy and "completely tooled up" so that he would be "able to do something that he would really like to do as opposed to doing something that he's pushed into". Michael felt that Buddy was particularly well-suited for politics or law, explaining that he had "two great advantages, one is that he's physically tall … that sets you up for almost anything. And ... he's going through the English public school system so that gives him a certain hauteur and a confidence".

Age 15-18

Buddy obtained excellent GCSE results and took four Advanced level (A Level) qualifications (the national academic qualifications taken from age 16-18, in which students typically choose 3 subjects) in English Literature, Drama, History and Latin, which Naomi termed "three solid strong A Levels and then his passion [drama] was last". He applied for a history degree, rather than drama, explaining "I think it's good to get a good education first before you take that kind of risk". For Naomi, going to university was "non-negotiable". While she recognised that drama remained "the consistent thread" in Buddy's life, she was confident that he had "a very mature head on his shoulders" and was making a responsible choice ("he doesn't want to make that [drama] his one trick pony in life – he needs a foundation"). Yet Buddy retained "ambitions to be an Oscar winning actor" and confided that he had "only ever really been sure about acting". He felt that because his parents had paid "for this awesome education" he should "at least have an ambition to do something else" other than acting. He also worried about the insecurity of acting, reinforced by a discussion with an actor at a careers fair who told him that "90-95% of actors ... are unemployed ... even if you're good ... there's no guarantee". Consequently, he explained:

> “I’m always on IMDB looking up these minor, minor people [from] Harry Potter ... I look up who played Death Eater number 4 … so I look up all these struggling actors and it just gives me a kind of reality check as it were”.

However, Buddy still secretly dreamed of pursuing acting:

> “Going into film making or writing would be absolutely amazing, but I also know at the same time that you’re going to need something more concrete, so in a way I’ve kept all those ambitions … I’ve always got them tucked away somewhere”.

Age 20-22

Buddy obtained all A grades at A level and took a gap year, during which he worked for a theatre company and a publishing house, before embarking on a history degree at a high-ranking university. He reflected on how his school had prepared him “for a certain kind of life” but he now questioned whether this was what he really wanted.

He enjoyed university life, particularly being in the drama society, although he knew his studies would be “easier” if he didn’t “overload” himself so much with drama - which left him feeling some “resentment” towards his history course. He reflected ruefully that he had taken the “established path” and wondered if he would be happier taking a more creative course:

> “I’ve gone to a great university, and I’m studying, you know, a relatively well respected and … I want to say ‘safe’ course […] But yeah … there’s part of me that’s sort of really wanting something else, something completely different, which is mainly the creative stuff”.

He started to question his decision to follow expectation:

> "Ultimately I've ... come to realise that I just want to be happy, right? And doing the things that are expected of me and things that will make me happy aren't necessarily the same thing, right? I think I need to make more difficult decisions in my life in order to try and reach that happiness... My priorities have changed ... I'm now thinking more about what would make me happy rather than what would be expected of me".

He felt that his attempts to "reconcile those two sides" (expectation versus desire) had negatively impacted his mental health and worried that he was not achieving his best. When asked about his future aspirations, Buddy replied: "I would love the idea if in 5-10 years' time I was working, you know, on the stage or behind the camera ... it makes me feel good to think of it". However, he still worried about the associated financial insecurity.

Buddy resolved to pursue a career in film or theatre "in any way possible" but worried that despite his amateur acting experience, he knew relatively little about the industry and hoped to gain work experience after graduating. He reflected how he had always followed expectation ("you *have* to go to school, obviously, you *have* to do your GCSEs, and then it's *expected* that you go do A levels, and go university, right, or at least that's, that's, that's how, that's what was expected in the school I was in") but now felt it was time to pursue something "for myself".

Hedgehog

Hedgehog is a White British young man from the east of England. Both his father (Larry), a postman, and his mother, who works in a supermarket, left school at 16. Hedgehog attended local mixed state comprehensive primary and secondary schools. He left school, aged 18, after A Levels, working first as an estate agent and then as a water technician. At age 22, he was

studying for a degree in film production at a small lower status university (as judged by national league table rankings) and aspired to work as a TV screen writer.

Age 10-11

Hedgehog enjoyed primary school, particularly English. He described himself as an average student ("I'm not the baddest, I'm not the goodest, so in the middle") and was "not the smartest person in the school" but felt his behaviour was "sort of okay". He aspired to be a primary school teacher, having enjoyed being a "play leader" at school, and hoped to go to university. Larry aspired for Hedgehog to "get a better education" than himself and said that while he would "obviously encourage" his son, he "wouldn't force him" to go to university. Larry felt that becoming a teacher would be a "good idea" because Hedgehog was "good with kids and everything". But mainly Larry wanted his son to "have a good career, get married, have children ... be happy, have a comfortable life …no financial worries or health issues".

Age 12-14

Hedgehog enjoyed secondary school, particularly drama. Larry was pleased with his progress both socially ("he's got in with a decent crowd. He ain't got in with the wrong crowd") and academically ("He's not, you know, a top student, but he's not a worst student. He's just a little bit above average, I'd say").

For his GCSE options, Larry encouraged Hedgehog to take subjects that he enjoyed ("it's no good studying a subject if he's got no sort of interest in it, because his heart wouldn't be in it and then that would reflect badly on the grade"). He explained that, as parents, "we didn't lay the law down and say 'look you've got to study blah, blah, blah'. It was the majority of his decision". Although Larry did encourage Hedgehog to avoid "weaker subjects" ("your media

studies and you know your dramas ...because they're quite easy subjects to achieve grades in rather than your core subjects, your sciences and your geographies, your histories"). He was clear that he did not want Hedgehog to take A Level media studies and wanted him to focus on subjects that would help him to become a PE teacher. Larry also worried about the costs of university ("you're laden with a load of debt ... and when you want to try and get on the housing ladder, it's a nightmare") and wanted to research if there were non-university routes into teaching:

Age 15-16

When Hedgehog's attainment in mathematics improved and he was moved to a higher set, he started to consider financial careers and a careers advisor persuaded him towards accountancy. Larry favoured an apprenticeship route as this "would be a better route financially because he's not going to be saddled with £36,000 worth of debt hanging over him").

Age 17-18

Hedgehog attained "pretty well" in his GCSE exams and took A levels at sixth form college in Financial Studies, General Studies, Business and Film Studies. The latter was despite Larry's repeated advice to the contrary. However, Hedgehog loved films and thought it was a good subject. While he saw film as an unrealistic career route, he wanted to keep it as "a plan B". Larry conceded that "there's no point doing a subject if your heart's not in it". Hedgehog aspired to become an estate agent because he did not want to be "stuck in an office all day 9 to 5, like that's not me". He decided not to apply to university after talking with someone at his local bank who didn't go to university and had "just worked his way up", which reassured Hedgehog that

“you don’t need to go to university to have like a good job”. Larry supported his son’s decision, reiterating “what’s the point in getting all that debt around your neck?”

Age 19-22

Hedgehog attained well in his A levels (including grade A in film studies) and started work as an estate agent. Although he “loved like driving the company cars, getting dressed up in a suit every day, having a nose round people’s houses” and was “good at it”, he also found the job “stressful” (“it’s just sales, sales, sales ... If you don’t finish the month with like ideal predicted sales, then it’s a lot of stress on you. You go to bed thinking about it, you wake up thinking about it”). He decided “I just needed to get out” and took a new job as a technician for a water company, that paid more and was less stressful. However, he struggled to find interest or fulfillment in the job and started researching university courses. He began questioning his previous decision (“every time someone was talking about [university], I was kind of, like, I just kept sitting there, like, ‘why, why shouldn't I go there? Like, what *is* stopping me?”) The crunch point came one day, as he recounted:

> “I was driving home one day... and I was just looking at myself – I had like the high vis overalls on and everything, and I was just like ‘this isn’t me’ like – I just don’t like it, it’s just not me [...] I don't know why, just something really, like, just *snapped*”.

Encouraged by his sister, Hedgehog decided “I’m just going to ... go to university before it’s too late, before I have any commitments”. He got in touch with his old form tutor (“I just fired up my laptop and ... sent him a big old emotional paragraph about what I wanted to do”). His former tutor was highly supportive and helped Hedgehog to apply.

Age 22, Hedgehog was loving his film production degree and was "so glad" he made the change:

> "It sounds so clichéd, but I do feel kind of like fulfilled and like so happy I done it. Cos I didn't want to just live my life thinking 'oh what if I did go' ... I didn't want to settle down with someone and have kids, and then it becomes more of a burden to kind of go and that. So I just thought I may as well whilst I'm young".

He reflected that he had "always" wanted to study film at university due to his "massive passion for films", but "for some reason" had followed the "easy route" into work, perhaps because he had assumed he would "never be able to get a career from it [film]".

He had no regrets ("So I feel like I'm doing the right thing ... I couldn't be more happier with how I feel about it") and hoped his degree would lead to film industry work, such as screen writing. He felt that he could never see himself "hating it, or you know falling out of love with it" in the future. He attended university careers events and avidly researched job options, although felt considerable "pressure" from his parents to ensure that his degree would be "worth it".

Extending understanding of 'going against the grain'

The existing literature recognises that transitions "are produced through discourses of subjectivity" (Hörschelmann (2011, p,380) that are negotiated between young people and parents (Saifer and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2017). However, there is less understanding of how subjectivity is implicated in transgressive routes. The following discussion considers (i) how family socialisation practices worked on and through subjectivity to cultivate a disposition towards 'responsible' (white, classed) masculinity that supported social reproduction and

constrained the young men's desired to pursue arts trajectories; and (ii) what facilitated the young men's transgressive trajectories, focusing on interactions of subjectivity and the field, through habitus clivé and societal discourses around neoliberalism and the self, arguing that subjectivity is a key site for young people's trajectory work towards both reproductive and transformative pathways.

Maintaining expectations: How family cultivation of 'responsible' masculine habitus hindered transgression

Buddy and Hedgehog's educational trajectories are interpreted as produced through negotiations between the young men and their families over 'desired' versus 'expected' forms of classed, white masculinity. Over many years, Buddy and Hedgehog strove to manage the tension between a personally desired arts trajectory and family pressure to follow an expected route that was seen as responsible and desirable for the social reproduction of white middle-class or working-class (respectively) masculinity.

The various constructions that the young men and their families articulated in relation to their desired and expected routes are mapped into a discursive 'trichotomy' (Table 1). It is proposed that these constructions operate as techniques that reinforce and maintain the normative/dominant status and power of expected trajectories (towards social reproduction) through gendered and classed attributions that set expected routes in opposition to (and hence denigrate) the young men's desired, transgressive aspirations towards the arts. For instance, both sets of parents repeatedly associated arts trajectories with stereotypically feminised attributes, as "silly", "emotional" and "immature" choices, based on the irrational "heart" rather than the rational "mind"/ "head". Feminist research has long drawn attention to how the arts are

denigrated through their association with femininity within a dominant gender binary construction (Francis 2000). However, this gendered binary was further differentiated by social class, rendering the arts not only an undesirable and inappropriate career trajectory for a young man but also as Other to both working-class and middle-class masculinity, due to its associations with financial risk ("unstable", "risky"). Arts trajectories were thus constructed as the antithesis of "responsible" middle-class and/or working-class young masculinity, in which respectable choices were aligned with "solid", stable and predictable routes, either "cerebral" (middle-class) or "practical" (working-class).

Table 1: The dominant discursive constructions of 'desired' vs. 'expected' routes in Buddy and Hedgehog's cases

	The 'desired' arts route	**The 'expected' route - Buddy**	**The 'expected' route - Hedgehog**
Academic status	Easy, silly	Difficult, challenging	Difficult, challenging
	Creative	Logical / cerebral	Practical/ hands on
	Loose, unstructured	Structured	Structured
Affect/ emotion	Passion, desire, want Love /emotion/ fire/ romance	Duty, expectation, rational	Duty, expectation, pragmatic
	Immature	Mature	Mature
	Heart	Mind	Head
Economic	Financially unstable	Lucrative	Financially stable
	Risky, uncertain returns	Predictable, stable, solid, concrete	Predictable, stable, solid, concrete
Labour market value	Specialist, 'one-trick', narrow, use-value	All-rounder, options, exchange value	Good foundation, exchange value
Status	Low status/other	High status/ "posh"	Respectable
Moral attribution	Irresponsible	Responsible	Responsible
Construction	*Feminine, classed Other*	*Masculine, middle-class ideal*	*Masculine, working-class ideal*

In this way, arts routes were dominantly constructed as “irresponsible” and antithetical to the ideal of “responsible” middle-class and working-class masculinity. The notion of responsible masculinity was a repeated motif in parental interviews, such as Michael and Naomi’s valuing of “cerebral, bookish”, “moral” and “measured” masculinity and their desire for Buddy to become a “mini” version of his father, “following” Michael’s trajectory. This resonates with Marbach and Van Zantan’s (2023) quantitative study of French *lycée* students’ higher education choices, which noted that fathers served as role models far more often among the most socially privileged (‘upper class’) families and that this influence was notably stronger for boys than girls.

Larry did not want Hedgehog to follow his own career and wished for Hedgehog to “do better” in his education than himself. However, he wanted Hedgehog to emulate not getting in debt and having “a good career, get married, have children and ...be happy”. Hence it is suggested that both families positioned the financially risky returns of an arts trajectory as incompatible with ideals of responsible heterosexual ‘breadwinner’ masculinity.

Both families engaged in a range of practices that helped to cultivate these values in their son’s habitus, to produce the ‘right’ choices and realise responsible masculinity (discouraging ‘risky’ Other desires). Much of this socialisation work was through everyday ‘small acts’ that, through repetition over time, created and embedded an understanding and expectation of what constitutes a desirable and appropriate route and a sense of duty to follow expectations. These practices included family ‘jokes’ and what have been termed ‘common sense objection’ (Collins and Cox 1976) arguments, in which an arts career was constructed as frivolous and incompatible with a more fundamental reality, such as the need to earn enough to “buy a house” and/or “eat good food”. Hence, arts trajectories were positioned as financially and ontologically risky. Other everyday practices included the positive reinforcement of aspirations that aligned with

expectations, praising compliant aspirations (as “sensible”, “mature” and “responsible” choices) and extolling the virtue of masculine rational decision-making (valuing “head over heart”, not following one’s heart “in some weird romantic way”, Michael).

“Expected” trajectories were reinforced through the cultivation of filial “duty” to follow expectations – epitomised by Buddy’s obligation to follow his parents’ wishes due to their financial and social investment in his “awesome education”. Hedgehog described a similar “pressure” and duty to his parents to ensure that his degree would be “worth” the risky financial investment. Hence, duty was inculcated and experienced as an emotional-psychological debt owed to significant others, encouraging conformity to expectation. These practices created some psychological turmoil for the young men, requiring them to choose between the “fire” of their passion and “logical” expected routes. Both took similarly pragmatic approaches to negotiating this dilemma, positioning their passions as ‘extra’ (“Plan B”) qualifications (that were “just for me/ interest”) that they pursued largely through extracurricular options for many years.

The forces and practices acting on the young men helped to create a “durable, transposable” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.35) and self-regulating habitus that was attuned to “schemes of perception, thought, appreciation and action” (ibid.). Hence Buddy kept his passions “in check” (e.g. looking up “who played Death Eater number 4”, as a “reality check”). Hedgehog also hinted at becoming aware of his own self-regulation, when he started to question, “what *is* stopping me?”, reflecting that it was primarily his own mindset that was preventing him from pursuing a film degree.

In these ways, families undertook considerable work on and through classed and gendered subjectivity to inculcate the young men’s dispositions and self-regulation towards expected trajectories that served social reproduction. This work was effective for many years, in

that both young men initially followed expectation – but how and why did they end up deviating?

Habitus clivé - initiator or result of social mobility?

In their early twenties, both young men ended up going against the grain of their classed, gendered positionality and expectations to follow their passion for the arts. A key turning point for both seemed to be experiencing a sudden (Hedgehog) or increasing (Buddy) sense of disconnection between their subjectivity (what feels authentically "me") and their expected trajectory, to the point where this disjuncture was no longer sustainable or bearable. This is epitomised by Hedgehog's account of the moment when "something snapped" and he realised that his current (expected) role was fundamentally at odds with his sense of self ("this isn't me") and Buddy's growing awareness of the gulf between his expected trajectory and his subjectivity ("I've just like come to realise that I just want to be happy, right?"), as he no longer wanted the "certain kind of life" that he had been trained for.

Bourdieusian theory does not provide many tools for interpreting such moments, not least due to its focus on social reproduction rather than social mobility. However, there may be untapped potential in the concept of habitus clivé / cleft habitus (Bourdieu 2007), when a person's "'conditions of existence' change so dramatically over the course of their life that they feel their dispositions losing coherency and experience a sense of self torn by dislocation and internal division" (Friedman 2015). While Bourdieu only lately and briefly discussed cleft habitus, regarding it as too exceptional to warrant much attention, other researchers have found that it is not uncommon among those who experience upward mobility (Friedman 2016). To date, habitus clivé has primarily been used to understand individuals' experiences of disconnection when a subordinated habitus enters an elite field, such as when working-class

students access elite universities (Reay et al. 2001). It has also been applied to explain young people questioning their previous socialised dispositions during school to work transitions, when their “experiences in an unpredictable present run in stark contrast to the ordered trajectory of future action they have been socialised to expect” (Alexander et al. 2022). So how might the concept help make sense of Buddy and Hedgehog’s transgressive trajectories?

Both cases exemplify a torn sense of self, in which previous socialised dispositions are experienced as being at odds with their subjectivity ("who I am"), which, in turn, is perceived as disconnected from their current “expected” education/ employment trajectory. That is, while both young men’s socialised expectations and their expected trajectories aligned, they no longer felt that these were compatible with their own authentic subjectivity ("the real me”), which they felt was aligned with the arts field. This cleaving may be facilitated by the emotional and psychological work required to navigate educational transitions and the toll this can take on individual subjectivity (Green 2010; Spernes 2020). That is, Buddy and Hedgehog’s cleft habitus may reflect the emotional and psychological costs of social reproduction that resulted from the suppression and denial of a personal passion to pursue the arts.

If the cleft habitus is understood as a habitus that feels at odds with the field in which it is currently located and experiences a lack of coherence between socialised dispositions and a given field, then arguably both Buddy and Hedgehog’s accounts may fit this descriptor. However, there may be analytic value in potentially extending existing understandings of habitus clivé to include instances where the disjuncture may not only arise from a habitus encountering a new field but from when the habitus cleaves from socialised dispositions through real or imagined contact with a desired field (in this case, the arts), to the extent that the expected route is no longer experienced as coherent or sustainable with personal subjectivity. In this instance,

habitus clivé is not the result or response to a new field but provides the impetus and motivation to change trajectory and access a field that is imagined to be more commensurate with subjectivity. That is, an experience of habitus clivé may also be a *precursor* that provides impetus for transgression from an expected trajectory – as the habitus attempts to reconcile the schism between desire and expectation – rather than only *resulting* from immersion in a new field. This interpretation accords the habitus a greater capacity for reflexivity (to recognise and reflect upon the conditions of its socialisation) and change than is often recognised within Bourdieusian theory and, as such, is contentious. However, it may warrant further conceptual and empirical attention for furthering understanding of social mobility.

Leveraging neoliberal discourse to support transgression

Both young men drew on discourses of neoliberal individualism – notably ideals of psychological happiness and self-fulfillment/actualization - to justify their decision to break with expectation ("I'm now thinking more about what would make me happy rather than what would be expected of me", Buddy; "I do feel kind of like fulfilled and like so happy I done it", Hedgehog). They resisted expectations of filial duty and conforming to responsible masculinity by invoking neoliberal ideas of "free and autonomous individuals concerned with cultivating themselves in accord with various practices of the self" (Dilts 2011). This construction challenges the dominant binary detailed in Table 1, through an alternative binary construction of desired vs. expected trajectories, as happy vs. unhappy, agency vs. expectation and, fundamentally, "me" versus "not me".

However, does the co-option of neoliberal rhetoric to resist social reproduction constitute a form of agentic subversive resistance? Buddy and Hedgehog's refusal of expected trajectories

and their decision to invest in their own happiness and psychological well-being could be interpreted as an example of liberatory subjectivity, what Foucault terms the ethical practice of care of the self. As Ball (2015) explains, for Foucault, "subjectivity is the key site of neoliberal government", producing "striving, enterprising, competitive, choosing, responsible" subjectivity. Hence resistance to governance entails the "struggle to think about ourselves differently". As Dilts (2011) further explicates, ethical subjectivity involves "practices that are explicitly self-conscious of their status as forming the self in relation to existing rules of conduct, or styles of existence".

The young men's re-framing of arts trajectories as legitimate for working-class and middle-class masculinity could also be read a gender-equitable ethical identity practice. However, these liberatory readings are complicated by the absence of an explicit social critique of unjust power relations. This omission makes the examples hard to distinguish from common technologies of neoliberal governance of the self. As Foucault (1990) reminds, practices of the self are always formed through relationships with power. It is thus debatable whether the young men's appeals to self-actualisation constitute "forms of subjectivity that are capable of functioning as resistance to normalizing power" (Oksala, 2005; p.12).

Intersectionality further complicates such interpretations. As Skeggs (2003) explains, "what we come to know and assume to be a 'self' is always a classed formation" that involves moral judgements and a relationship to economic exchange, but in ways that are always-already gendered, racialised, and so on. Hence the young men's struggles over subjectivity in and through their trajectories are both part of, and resistant to, the social reproduction of intersectional relations of privilege/ subordination. Indeed, to constitute a liberatory form of subjectivity, their trajectory negotiations would arguably need to involve "a continuous practice

of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside" (Ball 2015). Hence, it is suggested that the young men's transgressive trajectories were facilitated by their co-option of dominant neoliberal discourses of individualism, which they used – paradoxically – to justify a transgressive trajectory into the arts and hence resist the impetus towards social reproduction. However, these techniques did not constitute forms of resistance in a critical sociological sense, as they appeared to be pragmatic and lacked the dimension of reflexive critique.

Implications for education and careers policy

To conclude, two main implications for education and careers policy are considered: (i) challenging dominant human capital and rational action assumptions within education and careers policy and practice and (ii) providing more understanding, support and guidance around transgressive trajectories.

Challenging human capital assumptions within education and careers policy

In the UK, education policy is strongly shaped by the neoliberal context where, as Zipin et al. (2013) argue, the shift from the welfare state to the market state has been accompanied by a political investment in "aspirations", rather than citizen "expectations". Human capital theory "remains a shibboleth of tenacious neoliberal governmentalities" and informs dominant understandings of and approaches to youth transitions. This manifests through an instrumental, labour-market framing, in which young people's trajectories are valued primarily as vehicles to "increase productivity and economic competitiveness" (ibid.). The neoliberal lens affords primacy to the individual, positioning citizens as both capable and responsible for generating their own success within an assumed meritocratic system. Young people are expected to be

“entrepreneurs of the self” (Rose, 1999), striving to accrue capital and successful outcomes, with those who ‘fail' blamed for their failure (Bauman, 2004) due to “lacking in both sufficient degree and right kinds of aspirations” (Zipin et al., 2013).

Neoliberalism and human capital theory shape mainstream approaches to careers education in England. The Gatsby Benchmarks (2014, updated 2025) are highly influential, influencing the nature and focus of careers education provision in schools. While originally the benchmarks were not obligatory and merely offered "guidance”, in 2025 the government introduced the expectation that all schools, colleges and independent training providers would use the benchmarks to shape their provision. The benchmarks are a set of standards that define good careers provision in state schools – although they were originally developed through a relatively light touch analysis of careers provision in a limited number of international settings and a small number of independent schools in England. The benchmarks espouse rational individual choice and agency, positioning decisions as wholly or primarily guided by an individual’s possession and deployment of knowledge and information “to make informed decisions” (Holman, 2014, p.3).

The benchmarks construct the goal of careers education as being primarily to provide relevant information and experiences to enable ‘high’ aspirations and informed choices. By implication, unsuccessful outcomes are attributed to a ‘lack’ of aspiration, information and/or rationality. The benchmarks value some routes over others, notably “further study” is prioritized over direct entry into employment and (as discussed below) STEM routes are valued more highly than the arts.

Buddy and Hedgehog’s cases challenge dominant neoliberal assumptions underpinning national careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), revealing how

educational trajectories are complex, contested and negotiated through classed, gendered, racialised subjectivity and constrained by inequalities. They are not simply products of rational calculated decision-making. It may, therefore, be valuable for careers professionals to adopt a more critical sociological understanding that recognises aspirations, choices and trajectories as socially located, produced and contested phenomena. While the provision of information and resources is important, there may also be value in exploring how young people and their families might be supported to explore multiple potential avenues through a lens of critical subjectivity, which critically interrogates and surfaces racialised, gendered and classed expectations. Hence rather than simply seeking to support "informed decisions", careers education might support young people and their families to reflect critically on who they want to *be* - not just what they want to *do*.

Supporting transgressive choices/ trajectories

It is suggested that more support might usefully be given to young people who want to go against the grain of social reproduction, recognising that these are difficult and contested routes that may entail considerable resistance. Degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are valued particularly highly within dominant policy and discourse, due to being seen as key mechanisms for achieving a highly skilled workforce to increase national economic competitiveness. In contrast, arts routes have been devalued, both rhetorically and materially, as per 2021 government funding cuts (Reyburn and Shaw 2023). The so-called division between STEM and the arts is, of course, not new, as epitomised by C.P. Snow's (1959) famous pronouncement on the "two cultures" which, as feminists note, is constructed through a gender binary, whereby STEM is aligned with masculinity and the arts with femininity (Francis 2000).

The 2014 Gatsby Benchmarks espouse a normative bias/ steer towards STEM subjects, stating that careers education should help students to "understand that choosing STEM subjects opens doors to careers that would otherwise be closed" (p.13) and offer "higher earnings" (p.12). Hence, educational and careers policy might usefully re-consider such messaging around the value accorded to different subject routes and CEIAG might provide more support to professionals to recognise and support students who desire transgressive routes.

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