

Maxwell, C. & Aggleton, P. (2015) 'Researching elite education: affectively inferred belongings, desires and exclusions'. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (special issue: "Studying Up" in Education: Methodological Opportunities), 28(9): 1065-1080.

Researching elite education: affectively-inferred belongings, desires and exclusions.

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Abstract

This paper reflects on key moments occurring during the course of a three-year study of elite girls' education, with a focus on the power relations between researchers and elites within the context in which the study was conducted. Central to our analysis is a focus on the affective dimensions of interaction between the researcher and study participants. Our experience gaining access to the schools in the study illustrates how productive relationships may be fostered by a demonstrated alignment of interests, the desire for intellectual dialogue, and factors linked to the dynamics of the local education market. In our work with elite young women, we found that experiences of affinity, foreignness or awe within the interview process triggered different systems of affect. These moments are significant in shaping understandings about the social projects being pursued by elite subjects.

Keywords: elite education, reflexivity, research access, affective relations.

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Introduction

Within the field of elite studies, there has, until recently, been relatively little focus on methodological challenges and debates. Research in human geography has considered the issues to a modest extent (Elwood & Martin, 2000; Rice, 2010; Smith, 2006; Ward & Jones, 1999), and more recent engagements from elsewhere in the social sciences include contributions by Aguiar (2012), Harvey (2011) and Williams (2012). In the area of elite education, Epstein et al.'s (2013) have examined how researchers' political and travel biographies shape their experiences of entry to the field, and Forbes & Weiner (2013, 2014) document how gender shapes access to the field and relations within it. Howard (2014) has written about how conducting research on privileged identities affected both his own self-understanding, as well as that of his co-researchers and study participants.

However, as noted by Cipollone and Stich (2012), reflections on the research process, particularly in 'elite research sites' (p. 21) are too often provided 'as a brief final chapter, an afterword, an appendix or a 1-2 page mentioning' (p. 24). We aim in this paper, therefore, to contribute more substantively to the developing methodological literature on researching elites, specifically elite school (girl) subjects, by reflexively analysing our experiences of negotiating access to the field and interactions with 'gate-keepers' and 'participants' in a recently completed study. Reflecting on the affective relations structuring our research allows us to (i) consider the ways in which our identities and those of our participants were negotiated within the research moment, (ii) offer insights into the broader relations and dynamics shaping the local private education market which we were studying and (iii) describe some of the viscerally experienced practices of inclusion and exclusion encountered within the privileged spaces of elite schools.

Reflexivity in research

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It is often assumed that 'studying up' (Aguiar, 2012: 15) is more difficult than other forms of research. Smith (2006) suggests that positioning a sample as 'elite' is to highlight an imbalance of power within the research context. However, inequalities of power exist in all research relationships (Allan, 2012; Allen, 2008; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Grønnerød, 2004; Haworth, 2006). Central to in-depth social understanding is a research stance which, as Rawolle and Lingard (2013) suggest:

..... is able to reflexively understand the positioning of the researcher in respect of what is being researched and in relation to the intellectual field in which the research is located. (p. 118)

Through such an orientation, scholars can be more open to 'the good, the bad and the ugly' (Berbary, 2014: 1214) of the research experience, while remaining sensitive to their positionality in shaping both the data and its analysis.

Kenway & McLeod (2004) identify three ways in which the term reflexivity has been used in the literature – as 'a structural artefact of late/high modernity' (p. 526) as outlined by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) among others; as a 'necessary methodological stance' (Kenway & McLeod, 2004: 527) as advocated by many post-structuralist researchers and feminist scholars (see also Pini, 2004; Jackson & Mazzei, 2009); and, drawing on Bourdieu, as a 'practice of reflexively situating and historicizing the space of one's point of view as a scholar and a sociologist' (Kenway & McLeod, 2004: 527). In this paper, we engage mainly with the second use of the term to help us think further about some of the norms governing the field of elite schooling. As Pini (2004) outlines, reflexivity is about awareness of oneself as a researcher, taking into account how participants may seek to 'position' you. It allows us to make sense of the kinds of performance engaged in while in the field and the affective relations established (see also Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). All of this shapes how data are co-constructed, the analysis is approached, and the manner in which particular findings are foregrounded (Martino et al., 2013).

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Critical to engaging reflexively with research experience, is attentiveness to the 'affective intensities [which] flow through educational sites and encounters' (Kenway & Youdell, 2011: 133). Doing research requires some level of dialogic engagement with the field and research participants (Monchamp, 2007). This is especially pertinent for feminist researchers (Oakley, 1984; Stanley & Wise, 1990), but is also increasingly a consideration for others (Anderson et al., 2010; Burkitt, 2012). In our research practice, we acknowledge and consider our excitement and/or trepidation of negotiating access to, and entering the field, consider why certain participants elicit particular reactions from us (whether or not they are more or less overtly communicated) (Walkerdine et al., 2001), and concern ourselves not only with the outcomes for participants but also for ourselves as researchers from the studies we engage in (Hovland, 2007).

How then might we record and make sense of the affective intensities in our research? Clegg (2013) understands emotions as something people experience or observe within or on the body, while the affective is constituted by the structures that shape how these 'emotions' are interpreted and articulated. As a starting point we aim to consider and name the kinds of emotions experienced while in the field, and describe the nature of the interactions we had with gatekeepers and study participants. In analysing these further, we aim to highlight some of the affective structures and practices (Wetherell, 2013) that characterise the particular space we were interested in – namely, the 'bubble of privilege' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010: 3) that constitutes the private education market in England.

MacLure (2013) and Ringrose & Renold (2014) usefully introduce and discuss their engagement with data 'hot spots' – or occasions in fieldwork, during analysis or afterwards that make us stop, consider, feel uncomfortable, awed and so forth. We have followed this approach in the analysis we describe, given that our encounters and experiences left us variously surprised, unsettled and re-affirmed. Below we aim to describe and explain these emotions and reactions, concluding by suggesting how such an analysis of the affective supports a consideration of the

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broader relations shaping the field of elite/private education, and an understanding of how these privileged spaces can make some people feel like they belong, and others as if they do not (and should not) fit (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2013).

The study

Top Girls: Middle class privilege and agentic practice was a three-year, longitudinal study, examining the educational experiences and future aspirations of young women aged 14-18 years attending four elite secondary schools in one part of England. Its goal was to understand how a relatively privileged background (in terms of cultural and economic resources) and/or education in an elite space, drive agentic practices, and how these in turn facilitate the reproduction of privilege for this particular group of young women (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014a). Our work also sought to illuminate aspects of the private and elite schooling market in England, while extending understandings of concepts of privilege and eliteness in relation to schooling more generally (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013a).

The research was developed collaboratively by both authors, inspired by findings from our earlier research into the sexual and intimate relationship experiences of young women attending an elite school (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010, 2012). The first author led the negotiation of access to each of the four schools and undertook data collection (classroom observation in each school; interviews with 91 young women and follow-up interviews with 56 of these; and discussions with 16 senior members of staff). Both authors were jointly involved in study conceptualisation, data analysis and the preparation of written outputs.

The research took place over a three-year period. The identification of study schools and negotiation of access took place towards the end of 2010. The study's sample included young women from four different types of elite schools in one geographical area of England outside the

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capital city of London. We included co-educational and single-sex schools, two of which were boarding schools (mirroring the traditional public [elite] school along the lines of the imaginary constituted by the Great English Public Schools of the 19th century - Walford, 2012) and the other two were day schools. We determined that at least one school should be recognised locally, regionally and nationally as academically elite, commanding a top position in the national league tables of fee-paying schools with a high percentage of pupils receiving outstanding academic results at the end of Year 13 (i.e. when students were 17-18 years of age).

Fieldwork took place during 2010 and 2013. It included classroom observation in each school, focus group discussions in three of the schools (St. George's, St. Michael's and Abbey Mill¹) and in-depth interviews in all four schools. Initial interviews were undertaken between January and December 2011, with repeat interviews occurring between March 2012 and December 2013. Interviews with senior members of staff were conducted between May 2012 and January 2014. The first author regularly returned to each school to discuss and validate study findings, and a dissemination event was held for senior representatives of the fee-paying, 'independent' school sector in England in December 2013.

Key findings from the study to date have suggested that agency, privilege and affect are mutually constituted (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013b, 2014a), and that the reproduction of privilege is far from seamless – with young women's projects of the self being intimately shaped by the 'degree of alignment between their family and institutional habitus' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014b). We have also demonstrated how what constitutes an elite education in England remains informed by the legacy of the Great Public Schools, inflected by specificities peculiar to girls' education as well as the sway of the economy in shaping local education provision (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). We have subsequently shared the study's emerging findings with all schools. Two schools in particular

¹ Schools have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

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– Abbey Mill and St. Michael's – have found our findings concerning the influence of family and school habitus on the ways in which young women develop projects of the self (key contributors to the social reproduction of privilege), especially compelling.

Both authors are white and middle class, having attended the same elite English university as part of their tertiary education. Claire, the first author, grew up in mainland Europe and so had not encountered the stark state/private divide of the English education market and the ways in which 'class' becomes etched upon a person depending on what 'kind' of school they attend. Peter had grown up in a working class family, which considered itself 'middle class' but which knew little of the world of public school elites, university life and the social differences characteristic of the higher echelons of English society. As adults, however, both Peter and Claire, by virtue of their own educational trajectories found themselves firmly enmeshed in the chase for privilege and status that characterised the rapid expansion of UK higher education in the early 2000s. It was recognition of the way in which some individuals, by virtue of their class position and past experiences, display a sense of entitlement and 'effortless achievement' (both as academics and as students) within the English higher education system that triggered our joint interest in the present study.

Having set the scene, we will turn briefly to issues of definition. While understandings of what is an elite education and an elite school are contested, we consider all four of our schools to be variously positioned within an elite education market – first, by virtue of their academic and/or financial exclusivity (being extremely academically selective or charging very high fees – Kenway et al., 2013), and second, through the ways they seek to model their educational offer in relation to a historically constructed notion of elite education based on the Great Public School. Given the family incomes of most participants we interviewed, almost all the young women participating in

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the study could be considered upper-middle class or even upper class (a term in England associated with titled, land-owning aristocratic families).

In what follows, we share several key moments from the study, which we feel illustrate our experiences in the field. We focus first on how Claire was perceived and responded to during negotiations concerning access. We argue that feelings of affinity and foreignness – being 'like me' or 'not like me', but also a school's openness or defensiveness of its provision and market position were critical in facilitating the development of longer-term relationships between ourselves and the four participating schools. Later, we focus specifically on Claire's experiences interviewing the young women who participated in the study, pursuing the suggestion that individual moments may offer insights into the broader affective structures and practices shaping how privileging spaces such as schools, and interactions with privileged individuals, can result in feelings of either inclusion or exclusion.

Negotiating and maintaining access

Gatekeepers are critical when negotiating access to study participants, not only in terms of entry to a research field, but also with respect who the researcher will be able to talk to and/or observe (Epstein et al., 2013; Forbes & Weiner, 2014). However, as Cipollone & Stich (2012) have argued, access is an on-going process that requires constant negotiation (see also Bondy, 2013). It is therefore important not only to consider the 'tactics' that afford entry into particular research sites, but also how relations were maintained over time and the kinds of 'access' this does (or does not) allow.

In the case of two schools in this study (St. George's and Avonscott), access was facilitated by an existing connection between Claire and a member of the senior leadership team. Two previous studies had been undertaken at St. George's, in the form of a doctoral thesis and an earlier study by both authors (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2012). Significantly, the relationship established with

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the deputy headteacher as part of the original doctoral study had led to a productive partnership which included 'intellectual dialogue' (Smith, 1996) about, and some casual paid work facilitating sex and relationships education for young women at the school. After securing funding for a more focused study on the sexual and intimate relationship experiences in 2007, the deputy headteacher of St. George's welcomed Claire back with enthusiasm. When approached again in 2010 about taking part in the *Top Girls* study, he introduced Claire to a colleague as a 'long-term collaborator' of the school, who would 'always be welcomed'. In the case of this gatekeeper, there was an ease and openness – in his support for the research, in sharing views of the school, and in according the researcher the position of someone who could add insights into interactions within the school. This was largely due to the way in which findings from our earlier study had informed changes by the school to the management of young women and men's 'free' time and opportunities for sexualised interactions.

During our earlier study of the sexual and intimate relationships at St. George's, we interviewed several female members of the school staff team to explore gendered power relations within the school community. One key interview took place with a senior female member of staff who preferred to talk off-site and invited Claire to her home during the school's summer holidays. Sitting in her garden, in the summer sun, sipping a cool drink, we discussed her experiences of St. George's, the differences between her own daughter's schooling at a local state-funded secondary school and the social relations characteristic of the local elite school she taught in, as well as her reflections on a previous single-sex elite day school where she had worked (Avonscott). When we returned to St. George's for the *Top Girls* study, we were informed that this particular member of staff had since returned to her senior role at Avonscott. Thus, access Avonscott, as well as St. George's was facilitated through the existence of a prior relationship (as was the case for Howard, 2008 and Kahn, 2011; see also Reeves, 2010).

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About the same time, emails were sent to three other nearby elite schools. Each of these approaches were unsuccessful – with one school feeling there were too many other changes afoot (a new headteacher coming into post) to allow involvement in a research study as well, and another agreeing to participate. However, very abruptly, just one week before data collection was due to commence, this latter school ceased all contact with the research team (something experienced by Cipollone & Stich, 2012 in their research as well). The third school, the most academically elite co-educational day school in the locality, had initially been approached through a key contact provided by a teacher working at the school who was known personally to her. The deputy head who was emailed appeared enthusiastic about the study and said he would discuss it further with the headteacher. We then received a series of detailed questions about the research, asking in particular how the identity of the schools would be kept anonymous. In response to our replies, the headteacher, in a 'considered response' according to the deputy, decided that although the school felt 'confident' about its national reputation and the success of its recent entry into co-educational teaching, his view was that the research project would not be able to guarantee the anonymity of the school, especially with respect to 'competitor institutions', so felt unable to give permission for the research to take place. This was a disappointing response but revealed something of the sensitivity associated with researching elite education. It also left us feeling like we had been 'tested' and found wanting (an experience Saltmarsh and colleagues, 2011, noted during their research with Australian academics on higher education policy and practice).

Following an initial email to St. Michael's – a co-education day school - the first author was invited to meet with the headteacher. In all other schools, it was the deputy headteacher we had initially talked with, and who played the role of research link person. However at St. Michael's, the headteacher himself felt it appropriate to determine whether or not it was appropriate for his school to participate in the study. Upon arrival, Claire was invited into the headteacher's study, where a fire was roaring in the grate. Sitting in two comfortable armchairs, the two of them discussed the

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study surrounded by portraits of past headteachers and school benefactors. Following this initial meeting, the headteacher's personal assistant was asked to take responsibility for facilitating interviews with the young women who had agreed to participate in the research. At this school, there was a clear sense of our having to pass a 'test' before being granted access (Berbary, 2014).

Finally, entry into Abbey Mill (single-sex day and boarding school) was negotiated following an email sent to the headteacher of this school. During a meeting with the deputy head teacher it became clear very quickly that she was eager to establish an intellectual dialogue (Smith, 1996) and develop a relationship in which both parties should be seen as equals. This was evident in the way the deputy headteacher sought out our knowledge about how best to support young women to become confident and successful subjects in the future. At the same time, the deputy headteacher detailed her own biography and trajectory into her role at that particular school, positioning herself as a 'feminist' and committed educationalist, and outlining her vision for the education and pastoral care of the girls attending Abbey Mill.

Throughout our time at Abbey Mill, we were given freedom to contact interested participants directly. The deputy headteacher and her assistant ensured Claire was well looked after by making available refreshments and a member of staff or group of pupils to accompany her to tea and lunch breaks. Whenever she could, the deputy headteacher was also ready to discuss emerging findings. The relationship grew to include conversations about the deputy headteacher's own sons' experiences of attending a local state school and the positive and negative experiences of her ongoing engagement in a Masters degree in Education at a local university. Our experience in this school, and at St. George's, suggests that the initial negotiation of access and the kinds of relationships with gatekeepers at that moment go on to shape later research encounters in that space and the ways participants commit to, and engage, with the study (see also Reeves, 2010; Saltmarsh et al., 2011). Crucially, in our case, a shared interest in having an intellectual dialogic around the

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focus of the intended research, and an openness to reflect on, and learn from their institution's engagement with the research process facilitated a more effective working relationship for the both parties – the researcher and the institution/participants.

At St. Michael's we were afforded further insights into the way the school presented and facilitated the education of its pupils through the nature of our research relationship with this institution as well. Despite our initial impression of the school, and its apparent commitment to traditional rules and procedures, this understanding of this elite institution was quickly unsettled. While interviews with members of senior leadership team revealed that the school was trying to strengthen its credentials as a traditional English public school through membership of the prestigious Headmasters' and Headmistress' Conference (an organisation which seeks to represent the views of the 'the world's leading independent schools' - <http://www.hmc.org.uk>), as a co-educational day school, with few local competitors it also occupied a unique position in the local fee-paying education market. Because of this, it sought to 'market' itself as a supportive 'family' school in which all the siblings in one family could be educated together.

One year after having begun our research in this school, this sense of 'family' was extended to ourselves as well. A new role had been created in the form of a senior leadership position focusing on the educational, social and emotional needs of young women, and the appointee became our research link from then on. She welcomed the study as opening up possibilities for an intellectual dialogue, which would extend her own practice. Throughout the remainder of the study, Claire met regularly with the senior teacher both on and off the school campus to discuss the issues she was grappling with. Fieldwork notes for July, 2013 read:

Sitting in my back-garden, with a cup of tea and piece of cake, Sarah (pseudonym) has come to my house to discuss the emerging findings of the study. As head of pastoral care, she is particularly interested at the moment in trying to understand the experiences of young women at her co-educational day school and has been bringing in consultants to help run a new social and emotional curriculum. She finds our approach to thinking about young women's experiences very interesting, and likes the fact that we engage sociologically in

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this work rather than drawing on a psychological reading of our data – which is her own background and that of the consultants she has been employing. We exchange ideas in the afternoon sun, share personal stories about our children and decide to meet again the following term to talk more about the study.

What then facilitated access to these elite schools? Certainly, the use of personal contacts and prior relationships made a difference. In addition, it seems likely that Claire's background made her enough 'like us' not to be threatening. Being white, middle-class and Oxford-educated meant she had a 'good enough' pedigree to be acceptable, and her junior status as a 'beginner academic' meant that, in terms of intellectual authority and academic reach, she may well have been perceived as posing little threat to the elite school project as a whole, and to individual schools' market positions (Cipollone & Stich, 2012). Beyond this, the desire for intellectual engagement and a sense that schools themselves could learn and gain something from participating in the research, also facilitated access laying the foundations for productive fieldwork relations.

Even for those institutions less motivated by the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the research team, there was an overwhelming sense that schools agreed to participate out of a sense of altruism, and this final reading of what facilitated access is important, challenges previous writing that assumes that researching elites will be fraught with difficulties (Aguilar, 2012; Harvey, 2011; Williams, 2012). Occupying a socially advantaged position, schools could graciously agree to be the benefactors of research. The overall lack of challenge about whether and how social class and privilege might be critically explored through the study, and the way in which findings would be anonymised and disseminated, was surprising to us. Schools and senior leaders within them, felt there was something positive they could offer to wider understanding of educating young women how best to be academically successful and confident.

Finally, there were issues relating to the local education market. The schools that agreed to join the study occupied a relatively secure position within it, allowing them the confidence to become involved in a project that posed little threat and which might open up the possibility of an intellectual dialogue. The three schools that refused to participate perhaps felt they had more to lose

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in terms of what the study might reveal, potentially increasing their market vulnerability. All were all in close proximity to one another, competing for the same cohort of students. The headteacher of one of the schools that declined was correct in his assertion that his school's identity might be obvious to the other participating schools if they were to read any of the papers published from the study, as all the institutions knew the study was focused on a defined geographical area. In contrast, Avonscott (one of the study schools), which also competes for academic young women from upper middle-class professional families, is located outside the geographical area in which the three other schools sat, and perhaps was also more confident about its market position and the education they were offering. It may also be that the previous relationship between Claire and the gatekeeper, alongside the latter's intellectual interest in the work, allayed any concerns about institutional reputation. Our other three schools arguably sat outside the dynamics of the local education market – with Abbey Mill being one of the very few single-sex elite boarding schools in this part of England, with generations of families sending their daughters to be educated there; St. Michael's being the only co-educational, fee-paying day school in the area; and St. George's competing with other co-educational boarding schools across a much larger area of the country.

Through a focus on how access was negotiated, and our reflections on the field relations established, we have argued that the gatekeepers' and researcher's personal biographies (social class location, educational history) and prior acquaintance strongly shaped the nature of the access provided. Also influential was the extent to which key stakeholders within the school displayed an intellectual and/or professional engagement with the focus of the project, and the extent to which findings was perceived as relevant to the school's developing trajectory, either within the local education market or more generally.

Affective relations with young women

We will turn now to a rather different set of issues, namely the affective dimensions of relationships with young women in schools. Not only was school and classroom observation

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critical for the ways in which we were able to develop an understanding of elite education and formation, but repeat interviews with young women proved key to developing our findings. The importance of a number of affectively intense moments (Ringrose & Renold, 2014) - helped identify what it was we needed to think about further, and illuminated our understanding of the 'privileged' contexts of elite schooling and the production of elite subjects.

To inform the reflections shared here, we first listed all the participants interviewed and, reflected on memories of each of the young women as well as entries made in the fieldwork diary. Particular emphasis was placed on whether the interview moment was recalled as being open and comfortable, or unsettling and restricted in the ways in which narratives were offered. Reflecting on the list of interviewees, one factor that distinguished those participants with whom an easy relationship had been established, was how closely Claire felt her own social class location matched that of the young woman in question. Critical too was the extent to which there was empathy with each participant (a similar focus can be found in Bott's 2010 article on British migrants to Tenerife, attempting to make sure of how different and sameness was productive for her analysis of data collected). Here, we will explore these issues initially in relation to interviews with two young women at one school – one who Claire felt was quite 'like me' and another who was 'not like me' – in order to explore how class location, and especially financial capital and cultural status, affect the production of different kinds of elite subjects. Afterwards, we take this idea further to think about how Claire's own biography and her desire to how her own daughter might 'turn out' were also intimately linked to affectively intense moments during interviews, and our subsequent analysis of these.

Sophia was in her last year at St. George's. She was head girl, which meant that she and the head boy of the school had to meet with the headteacher once a week, address school assemblies, and emulate the school's values in her behaviour and attitudes. She was in receipt of a full academic scholarship; her parents having moved to England from Eastern Europe when she was

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young. Our interview with her took place in her room, late one evening and she participated openly in the discussion, offering a largely positive narrative of her time at school, though she admitted that almost no one else she knew she was in receipt of a scholarship. About 45 minutes into the interview, Claire had to abruptly close the discussion because her own daughter had been taken ill, but Sophia appeared understanding about this, contributing to the impression formed that she was a mature, insightful, very able young woman.

Two years later, Sophia was contacted again about taking part in a follow-up interview. She agreed to do so enthusiastically and indicated she would be happy to meet Claire at her house, as she was home for a few days from university. It was a beautiful summer's day, so we walked to the local pub and sat in the garden catching-up. Claire was again struck by Sophia's maturity and her ability to reflect on how her particular experiences at St. George's had helped her to manage various experiences at university. The informal nature of the conversation, the setting and the longitudinal aspect of the study helped shift the traditional interviewer-interviewee relationship. There was a strong sense of an intellectual dialogue taking place – as had been experienced with some of the senior teacher gatekeepers of the school. Sophia valued the education she had received. The social skills she had developed enabled her, she believed, to manage various interpersonal relationships, but she also understood herself as an outsider because of her family background. Such a social positioning afforded her a degree of reflexivity perhaps not available to some of the other young women in the study.

Another key research moment, which carried a rather different affective intensity, occurred when interviewing Lilah. Lilah was also at St. George's, but three years below Sophia. She came from a well-resourced family – economically and culturally – and was the third of four siblings. What made her most memorable during her first interview were the markers she used to describe herself, which included who her neighbours were – a very famous theatre actor on one side, and a well-known socialite who had been married to a famous actor on the other. It was hard to forget

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that Lilah knew and chatted to these kinds of people as part of her daily routine. In contrast, Lilah described feeling unsure both about her position within her friendship group at school, as well as her position within her family, where her two older siblings were attending elite universities. The atmosphere between interviewer and interviewee felt amiable and open. However, 15 months later, during a second interview, the interview dynamic had shifted slightly. At the start of the interview, Lilah was slumped on the sofa, and throughout it she was checking her mobile phone regularly interacting with Claire in a slightly detached way.

When asked how things had been over the past 15 months Lilah replied non-committedly – 'I don't really know what's happened ... not that much'. Such an account seemed to articulate closely with her more than slightly disinterested body language. Yet, later on in the conversation, she revealed she had done exceptionally well in her Year 11 exams, that she now felt surer in her academic abilities, and was confident about her choice of staying on at St. George's, rather than attending the school gone to by her father, brother and sister, to complete her schooling. She explained:

Lilah: *I think I'm kind of a bit more confident since I last spoke to you.*

Claire: *Uh uh. So why do you think that? What do you think's led to that?*

Lilah: *I think I'm a bit more myself than I was last year. I don't know, maybe I was trying to be someone that I wasn't last year.*

Claire: *Who do you think you were trying to be?*

Lilah: *I don't really know. Someone who like fitted in better. But now I've got my friends who I want and I don't really mind really. So ...*

Could the shift, noted in the way Lilah's used her body in that space, between the first and second interviews reveal something about the ways in which an increasing sense of surety about the self and the future (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013a) shapes orientations towards others, especially towards those social agents who seemingly have little relevance to a research participant's primary 'project of the self'?

Reflecting on the difference between our affective engagement first with Sophia, and then with Lilah, it is clear that perceived affinity and 'foreignness' in terms of social class location,

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respectively, influenced how we make sense of the experiences narrated. Lilah's background differed from that of Claire more substantially than Sophia's in terms of financial means, family educational biography and the social networks linked into - triggering a rather different system of affect. Lilah's confidence in approaching an interview with a university academic in such a detached way, when the majority of elite school-girl participants presented themselves as wishing to be 'helpful' to our research, was noteworthy. As a result of her nonchalant attitude, Claire felt she was somehow intruding, not welcome, and unable to imagine the life and the choices Lilah was having to make. Both forms of affective intensity – the first of affinity and the second of social distance – can, of course, be worked with productively during analysis, as demonstrated perhaps most dramatically by Walkerdine et al. (2001) in their study of both middle-class and working-class young women.

However, we also encountered a third affective response throughout the study, namely one of 'awe'. Sophie (Abbey Mill, Year 13) was planning to apply to study at Oxford. At school, she played two musical instruments and performed in concerts, while at the same time she was taking a lead role in a regional youth theatre production. Claire still vividly remembers a tall, slim, blonde-haired young woman, whose academic accomplishments and artistic talents appeared quite extraordinary. Whether she applied to Oxford or pursued her passion for music theatre, it seemed Sophie would be successful in whichever path she chose. In many ways, she surely typified the ultimate 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2009). Her performance experience outside school meant she felt she was more mature and worldly than many of her peers, and her narrative was confident and articulate. This had the initial effect of hiding the considerable effort that must have gone into the work of 'being Sophie' (Kenway et al., 2015; Skelton et al., 2010).

The awe Claire initially felt at the effortless accomplishment Sophie displayed mirrors the responses others may have when they meet her – pointing to the ways in which elite subjects retain their elite status because, as Pareto (1901/1968) argues, they are viewed by others as possessing the

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qualities and talents that constitute 'the elite of that practice' (Hearn, 2012: 59). The so-called top girl discourses noted by McRobbie (2009) and Harris (2004) may also have shaped initial responses to Sophie. Claire found her mind wandering during the interview, to consider how her own daughter, 12 years hence, might present herself to an interviewer and wishing to some extent that her daughter might present herself similarly, as 'effortlessly accomplished', with the world at her feet.

In contrast, Maria, also from Avonscott and in Year 13, displayed a more concerted, 'worked at' and less effortless approach to accomplishment. She detailed her strategy for strengthening her application to study medicine at university, and the other activities she was involved in:

There's a course in Nottingham that you can do over the Christmas holidays ... it's just things like that and like having your work experience, like getting loads of it. ... [Family friends have] said it (is) really useful [when applying to medical school], so you know it shows your commitment. ... I do kind of a lot of my work experience in the holidays ... like there's a hospice down the road. [I also] play hockey so that's kind of three practices a week. There's MUN (Model United Nations) ... and then there's Young Enterprise which we have meetings (about) after school. And then I do aerobics on a Thursday, just kind of a bit of relaxing (laughs) ... and then on Fridays ... I'm a group prefect so that takes up a bit of time going to spend some time with Year 8s and then choir and things, and Gold D of E (Duke of Edinburgh award) as well.

Memories of Claire's own secondary schooling biography mirrored to some extent the narrative offered here, in the sense of there being a commitment to hard work, a focus on preparing oneself for the future, and an awareness that reaching a desired goal should not be expected. In interview, it was possible to empathise with Maria and see her as being a little 'like me'. Comparing Sophie's narrative with Maria's, the sense of 'awe' triggered by the former is perhaps not so surprising.

Affinity (as in the case of Sophia and Maria), foreignness (as in the case of Lilah), and awe (as in the case of Sophie) were three of the affective responses most noted during the fieldwork in this study. Each fieldwork relationship however carried with it a particular emotional modality and intensity, and each opened up or set limits on what could be learned (Bondi, 2014; Procter, 2013;

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Walkerdine et al., 2001). Both here and more generally, feelings of affinity can often restrict what can be learned through over-rapport and too close an identification with a particular study participant. In contrast, a sense of foreignness may prematurely foreclose the development of productive field relations, especially when difference is read as *indifference* by the party who perceives herself as having less social and economic capital. Finally, the sheer 'overwhelmingness' of an encounter with someone who appears quite effortlessly to succeed, can also limit what can be taken in. Awareness of how one reacts to others aids reflexivity and understanding in deciding what to focus on and write. But crucially, reflections on the affective moments experienced during fieldwork in a study such as this offer insights into how privilege is reproduced (as we experienced it in the moment itself): through inclusion, through exclusion, or by the subjugation that can accompany a sense of distanced wonder and respect.

Conclusions

There is a long tradition of using the self to make sense of research data through processes of reflexivity, and this has been a particularly strong stance in feminist research approaches (Archer, 2002; Bott, 2010; Currie et al., 2007; Datta, 2008; Epstein et al., 2013; Forbes & Weiner, 2014; Pini, 2004; Rooke, 2009). In recent years, however, some of this work has been strengthened by an interest in how emotions and broader affective structures shape the focus and conduct of research (Gillies & Robinson, 2010; Hume, 2007; Procter, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2014).

This paper is positioned within these contributions, but focuses on the as yet less developed issue of researcher positionality within the study of elite education. Specifically, we have sought to highlight some of the seemingly 'small moments' in research and what they may tell us about the broader dynamics present in elite schooling. By focusing on two sets of issues – negotiating access and the development of affective relations in the field – we have shown how being perceived as,

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and believing oneself to be, 'like us' or 'like them' affects what can be accessed and understood, as well as limits how it is possible to engage with the narratives that emerge in the course of fieldwork.

In the relationships the project sought to develop with senior staff gatekeepers in each school, and in our interactions with individual young women, we felt (sometimes quite strongly) included, excluded, or simply tolerated. Most fascinating were the moments of subordination experienced in these encounters with elite subjects – both teachers and pupils. At times it was hard to discern just who was investigating who – feeling ourselves to be as much the subjects of investigation, and critically – judgement - by others. We felt this most strongly in the email exchange with one of the schools we approached who declined to participate after reassurances of anonymity were dismissed as being ineffectual, or during discussions with girls such as Lilah who it appeared barely tolerated their participation in the study. But more specifically, it was Claire's own biography and circumstances at the time of undertaking the data collection, which we understand as crucial for making sense of how we have analysed our data and the findings we have put forward as emerging from the study.

As Rooke (2007), Bondy (2012) and Proctor (2013) argue in relation to research on urban lesbian space, minority children's experiences in different communities, and collaborative research in primary school, respectively, being reflexive about affective responses within the field and the kinds of relationships developed with participants in particular spaces offers insight into both 'spatialised feeling rules' (Proctor, 2013: 81) and local regimes of power (Forbes & Weiner, 2014). As 'affective atmospheres organise subjectivit[ies]' (Wetherell, 2013: 234), an analysis of the relations developed with gatekeepers offers insights into the 'feeling rules' dominant within an initial encounter. Likewise, a focus on the affective atmospheres encountered in conversations with elite school girl subjects facilitates an analysis of privileging processes and practices (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014a) and how interactions with elite school (girl) subjects may leave others feeling

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entitled or excluded from the right to participate in such encounters. Together, both of these processes shed light on the ways in which elite and elite group members are able to organise their social encounters with others, in ways that regulate distance and difference as key ingredients of cultural and social reproduction.

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