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'My Mum Would Be as Pleased as Punch If I Actually Went, but My Dad Seems a Bit More Particular about It': Paternal Involvement in Young People's Higher Education Choices
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'My mum would be as pleased as punch if I actually went, but my dad seems a bit more particular about it': paternal involvement in young people's higher education choices

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Research on parental involvement in educational 'choice', as well as in educational processes more generally, has highlighted clear disparities between the close and active involvement of mothers and the more distant role of fathers. While this article does not question the broad patterns identified by such studies, it does suggest that, in some circumstances at least, fathers are both able and willing to become closely involved in decision-making processes and to take on much of the 'hard work' of educational choice. Drawing on a longitudinal study of young people's higher education decision-making processes, the article presents evidence of detailed paternal involvement. It then suggests that this apparent 'anomaly' can be explained by the mothers' and fathers' differential access to cultural and social capital; a lack of previous experience of active engagement with educational markets; and, in a few cases, young people's active resistance to the involvement of their mothers.

Introduction

Large-scale surveys have shown consistently that parents are the most commonly consulted group of people when young people are considering their higher education (HE) choices (Roberts & Allen, 1997; Guardian & UCAS, 1999; Institute for Employment Studies, 1999; Archer *et al.*, 2003). Typically, over 90% of respondents in these studies claimed that they had discussed their choices with their parents. However, qualitative work in this area has suggested that these statistics mask considerable differences in the role of mothers and fathers—in terms of both the level

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and type of involvement in their children's decisions. Indeed, drawing on a large number of interviews with parents of children who were making their choices about university and college, Ball (2003) claims that:

> almost all of the middle-class mothers ... were involved in visiting universities with their children. They also telephoned higher education institutions on behalf of their children and collected brochures and various kinds of 'hot' knowledge. Mothers and daughters, less so mothers and sons, represented choosing as a joint exercise. (p. 105)

He goes on to argue that these mothers played an important role in attempts to maintain middle-class familial advantage: 'The gendered nature of reproduction is ... absolutely clear, the invisible work of mothers as "status maintainers" is crucial to the development and knitting together and activation of different forms of capital' (p. 107). Discussing findings from the same study, David *et al.* (2003) provide further evidence of the significant contrast in parental roles. They suggest that there were, in most cases, clear differences between the close, intense and detailed involvement of the mothers and the more distant role of the fathers.

Although gender was largely absent from analyses of parental involvement in education until the 1980s (and still remains a relatively under-researched area), these findings are largely consonant with research on parental involvement in other types of educational choice. Studies by David *et al.* (1994) and Reay and Ball (1998) both reveal how, across a sample of both middle-and working-class families, the process of secondary school choice was perceived as mainly mothers' work, with mothers being the parent responsible for collecting information, talking to children and organizing and making visits to prospective schools. However, they emphasize that 'women taking charge is not to be conflated with women being in charge' (Reay & Ball, 1998, p. 443); the mothers were, in their terms, 'the labourers of school choice'. Similar divisions of labour between parents have been found in research outside the UK (Brantlinger *et al.*, 1996) and in choice of further education institution, primary school and even pre-school care (Brannen & Moss, 1991; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Vincent & Ball, 2001). Indeed, Vincent and Ball conclude that the heavy investment of the mothers in their study in the process of choosing pre-school childcare, even when both partners were working, suggests that 'the discursive construction of motherhood as placing the primary responsibility for the child with the woman still holds good'; fathers remained 'bit players in a drama whose key actors are the mothers, the female carers and the children' (p. 642). Moreover, there is strong evidence that even when both mother and father are involved in decision-making, they are likely to assume different roles, with mothers typically involved with 'searching and refining' and fathers more concerned with 'confirming choices' (Reay, 1998a; Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001).

Mothers are also strongly implicated in how their children *experience* their education (Lareau, 1989; Mann, 1998; Vincent, 2000). For example, Walkerdine *et al.* (2001) argue that the degree of congruence between the 'mothering practices' of different social classes and the dominant culture of schools has a strong bearing on the likelihood of educational success. They suggest that 'it is women's domestic labour that produces what counts as natural and normal development and that women have

been regulated very strongly as mothers, having the responsibility to produce normality, correct development and educational success' (p. 114). Reay (1998b) has also demonstrated the highly gendered nature of parental involvement in schooling and shown how it is mothers, rather than fathers, who take on responsibility for monitoring their children's progress, attempting to repair any perceived educational deficits and initiating contact with teachers. In line with Walkerdine *et al.*'s argument, she maintains that 'it is mothers who are making cultural capital work for their children ... it is mothering work which bridges the gap between family social class and children's performance in the classroom' (p. 162). Indeed, this evidence would seem to support Vincent's (2000) emphasis on the mediating role of the mother, standing at the junction between the private world of the family and the public world outside (p. 27).

Despite this evidence of maternal involvement and influence, in this article I will draw on an in-depth, longitudinal study of young people's higher education choices to suggest that, in some circumstances at least, it appears that fathers are both able and willing to take on the role of 'labourer of educational choice'. After providing some detail about the methods of the study and the characteristics of the sample, I will outline the various ways in which the young people's fathers were closely involved in their decisions about university and how, in several cases, this contrasted with the more distant role and ambivalent attitude of their mothers. I will then go on to suggest several possible reasons for this unusual degree of paternal involvement, some of which relate to the specific social and economic location of the young people who participated in the research.

The research project

The research upon which this article is based was conducted at a sixth-form college in the south of England ('Emily Davies College'[1]) and focused on the HE choices of 15 young people and their friends (Brooks, 2002). The young people in the sample were tracked from their entry to the college (in September 1999), through the two years of their A level or General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) studies, to the receipt of their examination results (in the summer of 2001). Over this period, each young person was interviewed on six occasions. The first interview was conducted during their first term at college and the sixth one was held after the A level results had been published. All the interviews were semi-structured and fairly wide ranging, covering the young people's educational experiences, plans for the future, friendships and lives outside college. In addition, they focused on the role of their parents in their decisions about what to do on leaving college. Typically, they talked about the extent to which their mothers and fathers were involved in their decision-making, any advice they had been given, what they had talked about together and any practical support their parents had provided (such as accompanying them to open days, sending off for prospectuses, locating league tables and even writing their personal statements for their Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS] forms). The young

people also described their parents' education and employment—and some provided considerable detail about their relationship with their parents, more generally.

All of the participants in the study lived in two-parent families throughout the duration of the research: 12 lived with their mother and father and three lived with their mother and step-father or mother's (male) partner. Only one of the 15 young people (Jenny) did not give any serious thought to going on to university during the course of the research.[2] Although one student (Rich) left Emily Davies College during his second year and, in his sixth interview, stated that he had no plans to go on to HE, he and his family had spent considerable time discussing his university options while he was still at college. All the other students applied to university during their time at Emily Davies College and were successful in securing places (two through clearing).

The social class composition of the sample

Recent years have witnessed a growth in interest in the educational experiences of the middle class (e.g. Vincent, 2001; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Power & Whitty, 2002; Ball, 2003; Power *et al.*, 2003). These studies have highlighted important differences between fractions of the middle class—but also the contested nature of many intra-class distinctions. For example, in their work on the educational pathways of academically able young people from the middle classes, Power *et al.* (2003) draw on Bernstein's distinction between the 'old' middle class (involved in the production and distribution of material goods) and its 'new' counterpart (involved in the production and distribution of symbolic knowledge). Others, however, have argued that boundaries are more usefully drawn in other places, distinguishing between those working in the public and private sectors (Dunleavy, 1980); those employed in the 'service' class and an 'intermediate' class (Goldthorpe, 1982, 1995); and those holding different types of occupational assets (Savage *et al.*, 1992). Degree of autonomy at work, level of job security and opportunities for career progression have also been argued to be effective means of differentiating between fractions of the middle class.

However, empirical research within education suggests that it may well be useful to focus on a number of different cleavages within the middle class. Vincent (2001), for example, places emphasis on educational experience and occupational pathway (and also on lifestyle). Indeed, in her study of parental participation in the secondary school sector, she distinguishes between middle-class parents who had lower levels of educational qualifications and who had 'worked their way up' to their present positions and those who had higher levels of tertiary qualifications, which allowed them to enter professional employment, mostly in the public sector. She argues that these variations were associated with differences in parental values and approaches to education (in this case, stance towards the professional autonomy of teachers and attitudes towards discipline).

In the context of the present study, this is an important distinction to draw. Previous studies of HE choice have tended to focus on those in the latter group, on young people with familial experience of HE, and whose parents were employed in

Table 1. Parental employment and highest level of educational qualification

Young person	Mother's job (and social class classification³)	Mother's highest level of qualification	Father/step-father's job (and social class classification)	Father/step-father's highest level of qualification
Becky	Sales assistant (IIIN)	O levels	Production line worker (IV)	O levels
Charlotte	Secretary (IIIN)	O levels	Engineering technician (II)	Degree
Clare	Administrative officer for an insurance company (IIIN)	O levels	Sheet-metal worker for railway company (IV)	BTEC
Jenny	Secretary (IIIN)	O levels	Manager of window company (II)	O levels
Jim	Secretary (IIIN)	O levels	Computer analyst (II)	BTEC
Liz	None—registered disabled	O levels	Labourer (V)	O levels
Lucy	Administrative assistant (IIIN)	None	Manager in a shipping company (II)	None
Mark	School teacher (II)	Certificate in Education	Salesman (IIIN)	A levels
Paul	School teacher (II)	Certificate in Education	Solicitor (I)	Degree
Rich	Occupational therapist (II)	Degree	Software engineer (I)	Degree
Sarah	Secretary (IIIN)	O levels	Project manager for construction company (II)	A levels
Simon	House worker	A levels	Marketing manager in a bank (II)	A levels
Steve	House worker	O levels	Field engineer—oil refinery company (II)	O levels
Sunita	Production line worker (IV)	O levels	Technician—motor car production (II)	O levels
Zoë	Secretary/PA (IIIN)	A levels	Policeman (IIIN)	A levels

professional occupations (David *et al.*, 2003; Pugsley, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001a). In contrast, as Table 1 demonstrates, only three of the young people in this study had a parent with a degree (Charlotte, Paul and Rich), and only two (Paul and Rich) had a parent employed in what would be categorized as a 'professional' (Class I) occupation in the Standard Occupation Classification (OPCS, 1991). In general, then, most of the young people's parents (or step-parents) had relatively low levels of educational qualification and were typically employed in skilled non-manual work or had 'worked their way up' into managerial positions.

The relatively small size of the sample in this study clearly limits the claims that can be made on the basis of the research findings; the conclusions are necessarily tentative. Nevertheless, the patterns of parental involvement evident among this group of young people contrast so starkly with those that have been highlighted by previous studies of educational choice that they suggest that, in certain socio-economic locations at least, a high level of paternal involvement—sustained over a considerable period of time—is possible. In the following section of the article I will provide evidence of the various ways in which the fathers were very involved in their son or daughter's university decisions and how, within many families, they (rather than the mother) appeared to have taken on primary responsibility for the HE decision-making process.

Evidence of paternal involvement in HE decisions

Over the two years of the research, it became clear that the level of parental involvement in the young people's decision-making processes about HE varied considerably across the sample. Indeed, it was possible to identify three broad and reasonably distinct patterns (Table 2). First, there were five families in which parents had a high level of involvement. In these families, parents discussed HE choices regularly and in detail throughout the application period; made specific suggestions about HE institutions and/or courses; gave feedback on their child's own suggestions of courses and institutions; and accompanied them on all or most university visits. In their discussion of parental involvement in HE choice, David *et al.* (2003) point to gender differences between their respondents in the extent to which they wished their parents to be involved in their decisions. They suggest that the young men in their sample were less keen than the young women for their parents to be involved, 'some because they were not progressing well at school, and others because of their desire for independence and autonomy from parents' (p. 35). In contrast, no such differences were apparent amongst the Emily Davies students. Indeed, of the five students who employed these highly involved, 'collaborative' decision-making strategies, three were young men.

At the other extreme were two families characterized by their low level of involvement in their child's decisions. In these cases, neither parent made any suggestion about a specific HE institution; there was little or no discussion about HE choices during the period of application; and a parent accompanied the young person on no more than one visit to a university. Liz and Lucy both explained their family's disengagement in terms of their lack of knowledge of the sector:

Table 2. Level and pattern of parental involvement

Young person	Level of parental involvement in decision-making process	Pattern of parental involvement
Becky	High	Mainly mother
Jim	High	Only father
Paul	High	Mainly father
Steve	High	Only father
Sunita	High	Mainly father
Charlotte	Medium	Mainly father
Clare	Medium	Both parents equally
Mark	Medium	Mainly father
Rich	Medium	Mainly mother's partner (male)
Sarah	Medium	Both parents equally
Simon	Medium	Mainly father
Zoë	Medium	Mainly mother
Liz	Low	Only mother
Lucy	Low	Only mother
Jenny	Did not consider applying to HE during course of research	

RB: Has she [mother] given you any sort of advice?

Liz: I think it all goes over her head to tell you the truth. You see my mum's not very academic. She doesn't know much about universities or colleges. (Interview 3)

Lucy: She [mother] knows that she doesn't know much about university so she keeps quiet about it. She just listens to what I tell her … so she's happy.

RB: Did she go with you to any of the open days at Bournemouth?

Lucy: No. She couldn't cos she was working. My dad took me down one day, to the marketing and advertising one at Bournemouth but he just literally took me down and dropped me off. He didn't stay to listen to any of the parent talks or anything. (Interview 6)

In their narratives, the familial passivity noted in the decision-making processes of many working-class families (Reay, 1998c) was evident. Occupying a position between these two extremes were the remaining seven families. Here, HE choices were discussed with parents, but less regularly than amongst the 'high' level of involvement families. Moreover, although these parents did make some comments about individual institutions or courses, they were less active in putting forward alternative suggestions and gathering HE-related materials for their son or daughter.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that there was a positive correlation between level of *involvement* and level of *influence*. In almost all the families involved in the research, parental assumptions about the purpose and nature of higher education had an important bearing on the choices their son or daughter made (Brooks, 2003a). This applied equally to those in which there was a low level of involvement and to

those in which parents were more fully engaged in the decision-making process. Indeed, other studies have provided compelling evidence of the significance of implicit assumptions about, for example, the type of university that is appropriate for 'a person like me' (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2001b). Such assumptions clearly do not have to be spelled out in any direct or explicit way for them to affect a young person's choices.

As Table 2 indicates, within those families who were highly involved in their children's HE choices, fathers played an important role. Indeed, the young people's narratives suggest that in two of the five families, the father had taken primary parental responsibility for decision-making, while in another two it was *only* the father who had been involved. Steve provides a good illustration of this. Throughout the two-year period of the research, he described the close involvement of his father and what he saw as their 'joint' decision-making process. Not only did Steve's father have very definite ideas about where his son should go to university, but he was actively involved in helping him to achieve these goals, through drawing up lists of possible institutions, phoning universities and taking him on tours around the country to visit universities on their 'long list'. The following extracts give some indication of the nature of this involvement (and how it contrasted with the role of Steve's mother):

> My mum would be as pleased as punch if I actually went [to university] but my dad seems a bit more particular about it, what he wants me to do. He says now you've got to college, you've got to go to university. 'It's all about stepping stones' is his favourite phrase. And now I'm on the second one. (Interview 1)

> My mum is quite happy to go wherever ... My dad, he would prefer it if I went to an old university, preferably somewhere with stringent requirements to get in, mainly as he sees it as the best way to get on ... Basically, I take the things out of the book [UCAS handbook] and write it in my notepad and then say 'I was looking at this today'. Basically, my dad has a look at what I've researched and makes his judgement on what I've given him or his preconceptions. (Interview 2)

> The main influence was probably course and the reputation of the universities that I'd be applying to. That was the main consideration all along. And probably that's my dad's influence ... cos that's basically his ideas. (Interview 4)

Similar themes resonate within the narratives of the other young people whose families were highly involved in their choices. In Jim's case, his father had a clear ambition for him to become a pilot and appeared to have taken on primary parental responsibility for encouraging him to apply to university (as Jim considered various other options during his time at Emily Davies College) and for researching the different institutions with his son:

> *RB*: Have they [parents] said anything to you about universities?

> *Jim*: My dad wants me to go. My mum's not so persuasive. My dad's like, 'Go' ... He's really keen on me becoming a pilot because it's like something he wants me to achieve. He's going, 'When you're at university do this, and then you can go on and do that'. (Interview 1)

> *RB*: Your decision to put Sussex as your first choice and Surrey as your second, did you talk about that with your mum and dad at all?

Jim: Yeah. They think that's the right choice cos my dad's been to all of them. My mum, she only went to the Sussex one and she liked that. But my dad went to Reading, Sussex and Surrey with me. He didn't think much of Reading ...

RB: And what about Hertfordshire?

Jim: That's one that my dad liked initially cos he looked at their website and had seen pictures and everything and thought it looked nice. (Interview 5)

Paul's father was also much more actively involved in his HE decisions than his mother. He had been involved in his choice of subject, encouraging Paul to study English rather than law because of what he perceived to be the over-supply of law graduates and Paul's ability in English. He had also used his contacts with solicitors to find out how joint degrees were viewed when compared to single honours degrees within the legal profession (Paul wanted to work as a legal adviser). His involvement also extended to institutional choice—Paul described how they had spent time together discussing whether putting Oxford down on his UCAS form might prejudice his applications to other institutions. In contrast, his mother seemed to have very little input to these discussions:

RB: Does your mum think the same?

Paul: I don't know. It's difficult to tell what she thinks, sometimes. I think both my parents are quite liberal-minded. But my mum never did a degree so she'll be happy wherever I go at the end of the day. (Interview 2)

Sunita also talked at length during many of the interviews about the discussions she had had with her father. Again, he seemed to have had a much closer involvement in her decision-making process than her mother—probing her reasons for wanting to take specific courses, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of different institutions, and accompanying her on all her university visits:

My mum went with me to Cardiff and my dad went with me to Cardiff and all the other ones. Yeah, my dad did give some opinions about what he thought, like whether he agreed or whatever. My dad liked Swansea as well. He thought it was quite good. It's just the distance. He said it was quite good, the way they were doing it—though it doesn't have the year's work experience. Generally, my dad said Swansea, Surrey and Southampton were OK. Cardiff and Exeter, not really. (Interview 5)

I did think about it [if would have to go through clearing] ... I told my dad, I said, 'If I have failed, what would I do?' My dad said, 'Just ring Swansea and see what happens'. I said to my dad, 'Is this one OK: financial economics?' And he said, 'Well, it sounds OK.' I said, 'I don't want to do maths now cos I got such a low grade and it's not worth doing it again in case I muck it up'. And he said, 'Yeah, fine'. Cos my dad was encouraging me to do something in banking and I thought, 'Well, this is like finance and everything, and banking could come into it. So, it sounds OK'. (Interview 6)

Amongst those whose families were less directly involved in the decision-making process, there was also strong evidence of fathers taking on a more active role than mothers. For example, although Mark's father was not particularly concerned which institutions his son applied to, he was not keen for him to study media studies. The two had spent considerable time discussing possible courses, eventually agreeing on American Studies as a compromise. Mark noted that, in contrast, his mum 'doesn't

really mind what I do as long as I do something' (Interview 3). Again, of the seven families who had *some* involvement in the HE decision-making process, there were four in which the father appeared to have assumed primary responsibility for guiding decisions. In these cases, the fathers were not just setting the parameters within which decisions could be taken; there was strong evidence that they were also taking on a majority share of the 'hard work' of university choice. It was the fathers rather than the mothers who, in Reay and Ball's (1998) terms, appeared to be the 'labourers of educational choice'.

Explaining the 'anomaly' of paternal involvement

This evidence from the Emily Davies students contrasts clearly with what previous studies of educational choice have revealed about patterns of parental involvement. Although some research has indicated that fathers may play an important role in *confirming* choices, it has strongly suggested that mothers bear the major responsibility for searching for information, visiting institutions and discussing choices with their children (Brannen & Moss, 1991; David *et al.*, 1994; Brantlinger *et al.*, 1996; Reay & Ball, 1998; Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Vincent & Ball, 2001; Ball, 2003). In this section of the article I will put forward a number of possible explanations that may go some way to explaining what appears to be the 'anomaly' of paternal involvement in educational choice.

The active rejection of maternal influence

In two cases it appeared that the greater involvement of fathers relative to mothers could be seen, at least partially, as a result of the young person's active rejection of maternal involvement. Both Sunita and Rich described how they felt that their mothers had been 'pressuring' them into making particular decisions about university and how this had caused them, at an early stage of their time at Emily Davies College, to turn to their father or their mother's (male) partner. Indeed, Sunita claimed that 'My dad's given me more independence in my thoughts. My mum is like pressurizing me to stay here' (Interview 3). In response to this assumed pressure to apply to a local university, Sunita had refused to discuss her options with her mother and had even concealed her interest in Hull University from her (because she thought she would think it was too far away). In contrast, she had spent considerable time with her father going over possible permutations of course and institution, thinking about her future career and discussing the various institutions they had been to visit together. Similar themes resonate in Rich's account of why his mother's partner, Jeff, had been much more involved in his decision-making than his mother:

> *Rich*: The only ones [universities] she's mentioned are York, Oxford and Cambridge and another one in London that's really good. But I'm not looking at those at all cos they are so tricky to get in ... I'm sure my mum would love me to go to somewhere posh like that.

> *RB*: So the ones that you've mentioned, that you've been quite interested in, have you told them about those at all?

Rich: Yeah, I mentioned ... you see my mum lives with her boyfriend, Jeff, for like eight or nine years now, so he's like my dad, but he's more down to earth and I can talk to him about the university and he sort of breaks it to Mum slowly. He seems quite keen on that one that I said looked really appealing.

RB: Has Jeff told you mum about these things?

Rich: Yes. If Jeff explains it then she's happy. If I explain it [directly to her] then it's wrong because I don't know what I'm talking about. So I tend to talk to Jeff and he tells my mum [what we've decided] and we get along that way. (Interview 3)

On the basis of this evidence, it appears that the mothers of Sunita and Rich were both keen to become involved in their child's HE decisions in the close and detailed manner that is outlined in much of the wider literature. However, in these two cases, as a result of the young people's conscious and active rejection of their mother's involvement in this way, their fathers came to assume the role of primary 'helper' and confidant—largely by default.

A general association between increasing age and greater agency in processes of choice has long been recognized within the literature on educational choice. For example, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) note that 'Beyond the age of eleven, adolescence moves the young person into the role of decision-taker as the family context encourages, allows, or, in some cases, resists, the growing individuality and self-responsibility of the child' (p. 204). They go on to suggest that choices made between the ages of 14 and 18 are a synthesis of inherited norms and emerging individual values. Nonetheless, although a number of studies of youth transitions have explored the ongoing management and negotiation of familial relations by young people (Ahier & Moore, 1999) and the rejection of *all* parental involvement in some decisions (Edwards & Alldred, 2000; Jones, 2000; David *et al.*, 2003), the particular type of agency illustrated by Sunita and Rich has not been highlighted in recent studies of choice by young people entering either further or higher education.

Differential access to relevant cultural and social capital

This 'active rejection' of maternal influence and involvement was evident in only two cases, however. In the other families in which the father had assumed sole or primary responsibility for HE choice-making, the mothers seemed happy with this division of labour and, as some of the quotations above suggest, appeared more ambivalent about their son or daughter's final HE destination than many of the fathers. In these cases, a more plausible explanation of paternal involvement seemed to rest on the differential access mothers and fathers had to particular forms of cultural and social capital.

Despite the similarity in the young people's social position (in terms of parental employment, housing and previous educational history), there was considerable variety in the type of cultural capital available to them. For example, some of the Emily Davies students had very little knowledge or understanding of conventional 'league table hierarchies' throughout the course of the research—or indeed about the nature of university study:

> From what I know, which is not much, I think university is really English, science, maths. I don't know if there are any other courses. I don't know what you actually do at university. I don't know if you get a degree or what at university. (Lucy, Interview 1)

At the opposite extreme, there were other young people in the sample who shared a similar social location and yet who had an acute awareness of the status differences of both institutions and courses. For example, throughout the research, Steve described how his dad had impressed upon him the importance of going to a 'high status' university:

> Well, I've had a look at the league tables that *The Times* published and they [the institutions I was thinking about] don't do badly, in all fairness, but they are not quite up there in the top band and also, it's probably to do with my dad more than anything, cos he's always drumming into me that, the value of a degree at a good university, how I should go to somewhere good. (Interview 3)

In his discussion of the various ways in which middle-class parents develop their understanding of the HE market, Ball (2003) emphasizes the importance of parents' social networks and their own educational experiences. In the case of the Emily Davies parents, however, they had little HE experience of their own to draw upon (see Table 1), and few of the young people mentioned that their parents had talked about their HE choices with any of their friends or other social contacts (Paul's father was a notable exception). Instead, the young people's narratives suggested that those parents who were aware of status differences and the operation of an HE 'market' had gained their knowledge from two main sources: what they had been told by teachers at their child's school and/or college, and their own experiences within their place of work (Brooks, 2003a).

When this knowledge had been gained from school, it appeared that it was associated with greater maternal involvement (for example, in the case of Becky and Zoë). However, when an awareness of status differences had been generated from places of work, the association was with *paternal* involvement. Indeed, amongst this group of young people, the fathers' jobs and places of work seemed to be more productive in terms of generating 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) than those of the mothers. Steve's father, for example, had gained his understanding of what he supposed to be the close relationship between 'rank' of university attended and position in the labour market from what he had picked up from colleagues at work (in an oil refinery company). Similarly, although he had no experience of HE himself, Simon's father had talked to graduates about the universities they had attended in his role as marketing manager for a bank. In contrast, the mothers of both Steve and Simon worked within the home and thus had little access to such 'grapevine information'. Their experience was markedly different from 'Mrs Summers' in Ball's (2003) research, who described how she felt she had let her daughter down by not ensuring that she applied to Cambridge: 'I am quite happy with her at Nottingham in one sense, but you see I have been around and I have seen the realities of the situation in the employment market' (p. 106). Few of the mothers in the Emily Davies study had, according to their sons and daughters, 'been around' in a similar way. Although they may have had the time to devote to the 'labour of educational choice', their social

networks and place of work militated against them accessing relevant knowledge of the nature and impact of HE hierarchies.

It appeared that, in these families, the father took on the role of main 'adviser' and 'helper' with HE applications primarily because of his greater knowledge of the HE market which, in turn, was derived from his experiences at work. Thus, in these cases, the gender differences in level of involvement in educational choice seemed to be intimately related to differences in gender positioning within the labour market.

Few precedents of processes of educational choice

In seeking to explain why the experiences of the Emily Davies students differed from those reported in other recent studies of parental participation in HE choice it is useful to set their decisions about university within a broader context of educational choice. A significant body of research has indicated that, in metropolitan areas at least, the middle classes are very active 'choosers' within educational markets. The work of Gewirtz and colleagues (1995), for example, has highlighted considerable differences between middle-class families and their working-class counterparts in both their inclination and ability to choose within London secondary school markets—driven partially, the authors argue, by the desire of middle-class parents to maximize their social advantage. Moreover, a distinct 'strategic-ness' on the part of the middle classes in processes of choice has been noted in relation to decisions about primary schools and even pre-school childcare (Vincent & Ball, 2001; Ball, 2003). However, research outside London has revealed a more mixed picture. While there does seem to be some evidence of active middle-class choosing in other geographical areas (Power *et al.*, 1998, 2003), Foskett and Hemsley-Brown's (2001) analysis of school choice studies found that 'most ... suggest that the majority of parents do not engage in an active choice process at all or only consider a very small number of schools' (p. 59). Indeed, Foskett's (1995) own research—conducted in an area close to Emily Davies College—suggested that only 10% of families may actively choose between more than two secondary schools.

Similar patterns emerged from the accounts of the Emily Davies students. From their descriptions of their 'educational histories', it was clear that until they had been required to make explicit decisions about higher education, few of the young people's families had engaged in active processes of educational choice (Brooks, 2003b). Most had gone to their local primary school, the local secondary school and then on to the local sixth-form college, as Clare explained:

> Coleridge [secondary school] and Milton [junior school], they are sort of, everyone moves up in the same stages. You start at the beginning of junior school with the same people you go to secondary school and then college with. (Interview 1)

Indeed, when they were asked how they had decided to come to Emily Davies College, only two students described significant parental involvement (Paul and Rich—the two young people in the sample with the highest level of parental qualification). In their accounts, the high level of parental investment and respon-

sibility reported in the accounts of middle-class decision-making given by Ball (2003) and Power *et al.* (2003) is evident. For all the other young people, however, the decision appeared to have been theirs—few reported that their parents had been actively involved in the process. For these young people, proximity to home and a critical mass of friends also transferring to Emily Davies were the main reasons for choosing the college. While a number of them had visited other colleges, few reported having found their decision difficult. The following comments were typical:

> *Simon*: Firstly, it was a local college. Secondly, the law was a big thing cos I've wanted to do law for ages and I looked at the colleges around. Brookwood don't actually do law and Emily Davies does, so I thought, well. It was going to be between those two cos all my friends go to either Emily Davies or Brookwood, and Emily Davies does law and Brookwood doesn't.
>
> *RB*: Did you visit Brookwood?
>
> *Simon*: No. Can't say I did … I looked at the prospectuses and when I had my careers interview I also asked if they did law. And they said that they don't have a law department. (Interview 1)
>
> *Jim*: Well, my brother came here and he said it was like, a good college to come to. When I came to the open evening, cos this was the first one I came to, it was 'Yes, this is the college I want to come to' cos there were nice people, a warm sort of atmosphere.
>
> *RB*: Did you consider anywhere else?
>
> *Jim*: I was thinking about Westleigh College and Brookwood but I didn't actually go to those two open evenings.
>
> *RB*: Did any of your friends from your old school come to Emily Davies?
>
> *Jim*: The majority of them—nearly everyone I know. Only a few went elsewhere. (Interview 1)
>
> It was a consideration between Emily Davies and Brookwood. I came here cos it was like closer to home. If I went to Brookwood I'd have travel problems. I'd have to spend a lot of time going there and coming back … I also came cos I thought I'd have some friends here. (Sunita, Interview 1)
>
> Well, first it was just a lot more convenient to come to. It probably did have a lot to do with a lot of my friends coming here as well. It did the courses I want to do so I didn't really see the need to go anywhere else. (Clare, Interview 1)

The geography of this particular market provided less of a choice for the young people than comparable markets in more urban areas. Furthermore, very few of these families would have had the financial resources to send their son or daughter to a private school. Most importantly, however, there appeared to be no inclination on the behalf of parents or their children to engage in processes of choice prior to HE. Notably absent from the young people's accounts was any mention of the reputation of different schools and colleges. Despite one of the local sixth-form colleges (Brookwood) having very high A level scores and a track record of numerous successful Oxbridge applications each year—as well as frequently being included in lists of the 'top ten' sixth-form colleges in the country—few had given it very serious consideration. Thus, on the basis of this evidence, the previous educational decisions

of the young people involved in this research appear to have more in common with the (largely working-class) 'disconnected choosers' described by Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) than their middle-class 'skilled' or 'semi-skilled' counterparts:

> It is not that these parents [disconnected choosers] have no views about education, or no concerns about schools and their children's experiences and achievement. They do, but they do not see their children's enjoyment of school or their educational success as being facilitated in any way by a consumerist approach to school choice. For these parents, the idea of examining a wide range of schools is not something which enters their frame of thinking ... While the skilled/privileged choosers often ended with two possible schools from their process of elimination and comparison, the disconnected almost always began with, and limited themselves, to two. These would be schools in close physical proximity and part of their social community. (p. 45)

As discussed earlier in this article, there is strong evidence that within families that *do* actively engage in educational decisions, whether at pre-school, primary or secondary level, it is the mother who assumes primary responsibility. In these cases, it seems likely that mothers would then have useful experience and skills (of, for example, information gathering, 'grapevining' and comparing institutions) which could provide a template for making HE decisions. Moreover, the mother's role as 'labourer of educational choice' may have already come to be clearly defined within the family as a result of these earlier decision-making processes. In contrast, within the Emily Davies families, these conditions did not prevail. Few of the mothers had previous relevant experience upon which they were able to draw. Furthermore, there did not appear to be any expectations on behalf of the young people that their mothers would assume this role; it had not been pre-defined on the basis of past experience.

With no such precedents of maternal involvement to draw upon, it seems possible that decisions about university are less likely to be equated with 'childcare' than choices at other stages of a child's educational career. Indeed, there was some evidence from the young people that, within their families, higher education choices were perceived as 'high status' choices. In Paul's case, starting to think about higher education had seemed to signal, to his father at least, entry into a new and more important part of the education system. He described how, since he had been at Emily Davies College, his father had become more involved in his education and had taken over the mantle of 'educational responsibility' from his mother.

> My dad came to parents' evening. He never used to come to parents' evening at school. It was always my mum who did that. She was a secondary school teacher. Probably my dad feels more at home in further education and higher education ... So he came and my mum didn't come. He's never really been to a parents' evening with me before and we went round to see all my different teachers and I had to brief him on who they were, what they taught me and what I thought of them. (Interview 2)

This suggests that Paul's father may have been motivated to assume new responsibilities in relation to his son's education because he had reached what he saw as the penultimate stage of his educational career.

It is possible to hypothesize that if these parents had been more engaged in processes of choice earlier in their child's education, it is likely that the role of primary

'helper' or 'labourer' would have fallen to the mother, as a result of widespread assumptions that it is she rather than the father who is responsible for the social and academic (as well as physical) growth of their children (Vincent, 2000) (although here there are clearly variations by both social class and employment status, as Ferri and Smith [2003] and Lewis [2000] have shown). This, then, would have embedded certain expectations about parental roles with regard to choice within the family. Without this prior experience, it seems likely that parental roles in relation to choice were able to remain more fluid. If we assume that the capacity and inclination to make active choices about primary, secondary and further education may be greater amongst a more privileged, upper-middle-class sample, in possession of more relevant forms of cultural capital, this reading would suggest an association between the socio-economic position of the Emily Davies families and the 'anomaly' of paternal involvement.

Conclusion

As I noted in the first part of the article, this discussion of paternal involvement in processes of educational choice, and especially the various explanations I have put forward, must remain tentative, given the relatively small size of the sample. For example, it is possible that patterns of parental involvement may differ with marital status. Although Standing (1997) has demonstrated that, amongst her sample of low income lone mothers, fathers had little, if any, involvement in choices about their children's education, other researchers (David *et al.*, 1994; Smart, 1998; Smart & Neale, 1999) have suggested that changes in 'fathering' practices may be brought about by divorce, with fathers who no longer live in the young person's home keen to increase their involvement in their children's lives and, in some cases, take on more responsibility for their education. Furthermore, one of the few highly involved fathers in David *et al.*'s (2003) research was a widower, leading the authors to speculate that his unusual degree of participation in HE decisions 'may have been because he was a widower and he had to play a general parental role rather than a more traditional paternal role that would tend to be as the less involved parent' (p. 34). However, as outlined previously, during the course of the research at Emily Davies College, only three respondents did not live with both their biological parents. While their familial relationships did not differ in any obvious respect from those of the other young people, the sample is clearly not large enough to explore such differences in any systematic way.

The size of the sample also limits the claims that can be made about the relationship between the gender of the child and that of the parent. Research within compulsory education has shown how girls are more likely than boys to involve their mothers in their education (Edwards & Alldred, 2000) while, in David *et al.*'s (2003) study, of those young people who volunteered their parents for interview about involvement in their child's HE decisions, young men were more likely than young women to put forward their father. Similarly, at Emily Davies College there were more examples of high paternal involvement amongst the young men in the sample than amongst the

young women. Nevertheless, as noted previously, this must be treated with some caution: the numbers are small; more young men than young women described a high level of parental involvement in their choices, in general; and several young women also outlined how it was their father, rather than their mother, who had been most involved in their decision-making.

Despite these caveats, and in contrast to much previous work in this area, the study does suggest that close paternal involvement in decision-making is possible, even in families with no overt commitment to gender equality in more general parenting roles. I have suggested that this pattern of parental involvement evident amongst the Emily Davies families can be explained by some young people's active rejection of what they perceived to be the over-intrusive involvement of their mothers. In these examples, fathers took on primary responsibility for decisions largely by default. In other cases, however, paternal involvement appeared to be more closely associated with maternal passivity and ambivalence and, I have argued, was related to the specific socio-economic location of this sample of young people. In their overview of feminist studies within education, Dillabough and Arnot (2001) note that 'current research on the role of education in the lives of women offers rich data on the interface between material structures, identities and agency' (p. 46). This article has suggested that there are also close connections between material structures, agency and the roles played by mothers and fathers in the process of HE choice. Within some families, at least, the allocation of gender roles was intimately related to the different positions the mothers and fathers occupied within the labour market and, in particular, to their differential access to relevant cultural and social capital. Some fathers assumed main responsibility for their son or daughter's HE decisions because of their greater proximity to sources of 'hot' knowledge.

Finally, I have suggested that patterns established by previous educational choices may be important in defining parental roles. In contrast to the patterns outlined in other studies of middle-class decision-making, few of the (largely middle-class) families in this research had made very active choices about primary, secondary or further education. Other research has suggested that when parents are involved in this way—at an earlier stage in a young person's education—the main responsibility for carrying out the 'hard work' of educational choice usually falls to the mother. This may then set a precedent for HE choice—in terms of both familial expectations and parental skills. However, when families have not previously engaged with the educational market—or have remained 'disconnected choosers'—it is possible that parental roles remain more fluid. For fathers, in these circumstances, carrying out the labour of HE choice may thus seem quite removed from the activities of 'childcare'.

In their research on educational choices (from primary education through to higher education), Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) argue that 'a strong theme which underpins our view of choice ... is that in reality these choice points are not discrete, unique experiences but are simply part of a complex web of choice and decision-making that links every choice and decision from birth to labour market entry' (p. 201). The evidence from the Emily Davies students suggests that while these

interrelationships are not in doubt, they may lead to decision-making processes being configured differently at various stages of a young person's educational career.

In conclusion, while the evidence from the Emily Davies students does not in any way undermine the apparently widely held assumption that childcare remains primarily a women's responsibility, or indeed, the compelling evidence that the majority of 'educational work' is carried out by mothers, it does suggest that, in particular situations, fathers are both able and willing to assume the role of 'labourer of educational choice'.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. I chose 'Emily Davies College' as the pseudonym for the fieldwork college after Emily Davies, the Victorian feminist, who was a pioneer of women's higher education in the UK. The pseudonym has been used in a number of other publications arising from the project and has no particular relevance to the arguments that are advanced in this article.
2. At the beginning of the research Jenny enrolled on a GNVQ in health and social care and hoped to go on to university. However, she then repeated the first year of the course during her second year at college and, at the end of the two-year period, planned to transfer to the local general further education college to study for a secretarial qualification.
3. The social class classification developed by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (1991) is used here.

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