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## *Gender Issues in Parental Involvement in Student Choices of Higher Education*

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores gender, social class and ethnic issues in parental involvement in students' choices of higher education. It draws upon interviews with students and their parents, who were a small group of an Economic and Social Research Council-funded study of students' higher education choice processes in the UK. Gender was highly significant in several respects, illustrating changes in higher education over the last 20 years, whereby more women than men now enter higher education. Most of the interviewees were female. They were mothers and daughters who were thinking about higher education. The article explores first how gender is inflected in choice processes—from whether students choose to involve their parents in the study, to their parents' characteristics, to the forms of involvement revealed. Different facets of involvement are considered—interest, influence and support, investment and intrusion. Secondly, the article provides illustrations of girls' collaborative approaches to the choice processes, in which some of their mothers also engage. This is contrasted with boys' perspectives and those of fathers who were interviewed. This illustrates how gender is woven through social networks across the generations. Parental involvement varied in terms of gender, educational and social backgrounds, or notions of 'institutional' and 'familial habitus'. Finally, the authors reflect upon why gender is salient in how young people and their parents think about their involvement in choosing universities and relate this to changes in higher education policies and practices.*

### **Introduction**

This article highlights how gender is threaded through the processes of choosing higher education in the UK. Given the changes in higher education over the last 20 years whereby more women than men now enter higher education, we consider how these changes affect the processes of choice by looking at differences in the ways families from

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various social class and minority ethnic groups were involved. Drawing on our larger Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study, we consider gender differences between students and their parents, showing that more female students and parents were involved. First, we present material about our research methods and how gender influenced the ways in which male and female students decided whether to involve their parents in interviews. Secondly, we explore the characteristics of our parent sample, which consisted mainly of mothers. Thirdly, we look at various facets of parental involvement in choices of higher education in terms of intrusion, interest, influence and investment and relate them to notions of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Finally, we present illustrations of the different ways in which women were involved in the processes of choice by contrast with men. We look at the ways in which female students tended to collaborate with their friends over choosing universities and how mothers' involvement followed similar patterns, whilst male students and fathers were more individualistic.

### **Gender and the Expansion of Higher Education**

The expansion of higher education globally has entailed changes in the characteristics of institutions and their student clientele. In the UK, over the last 25 years, there has been a massive increase in the numbers of students participating in higher education, from three-quarters of a million students to well over two million students (see Tables I and II [1]). This has also entailed a dramatic shift in the balance between male and female students. In 1975–76 the ratio of female to male students—the gender gap—was 0.46:1 whereas by 1999–2000 this had reversed to 1.20:1 for all full- and part-time students (1.15:1 for full-time students and 1.28:1 for part-time students). Similarly, there has been an enormous increase in the proportions of students obtaining the necessary qualifications to enter higher education, with a very similar shift in the gender gap from 0.85:1 to 1.21:1 over the same time period (see Tables III and IV). However, these students do not all attend the same kinds of educational institutions, and they do not come from the same kinds of family, social and ethnic backgrounds.

A complex stratification of institutions has been created within Britain (Scott, 1998;

TABLE I. Higher education students by sex 1975–76 (in thousands)

Sex	All Students
Male	470
Female	264

\* There was no distinction made between full- or part-time students.

TABLE II. Students in higher education by gender 1999–2000 (in thousands)

Gender	Full-time	Part-time
Male	593.1	346.7
Female	683.2	444.4

TABLE III. Pupils leaving school by sex and highest qualification held 1975–76 (in thousands)

Sex	2 or more A levels	1 A level	Total
Male	61	15	76
Female	49	16	65

TABLE IV. Students of any age achieving GCE A levels 1999–2000 (in thousands)

Gender	2 or more A levels	1 A level	Total
Male	118.0	28.7	146.6
Female	140.9	36.9	177.7

Collins, 1999) through changes in the financing of higher education and the introduction of market forces in public policy provision. In our study we wanted to explore how families were involved, as consumers, in the processes of choice of higher education. The notion of parental involvement has become critical in public policy discourses about families and education. Although these discourses have generally focused upon altering home–school relations (David, 1999), through marketisation (Kenway *et al.*, 1997; Ball, 1998), the new processes of consumer involvement have begun to permeate all levels of education. The ways in which different classes and families have experienced the changes in schools have been carefully documented by educational and social researchers (David *et al.*, 1994; Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Power 2000).

Gender has been studied in relation to families and educational reforms (David, 1993; David *et al.*, 1994; Reay, 1998a). There have also been a number of studies of how the expansion of educational opportunities has affected gender and social class relations (Egerton & Halsey, 1993; Arnot *et al.*, 1999). However, the experiences of new generations of men and women have not been extensively researched, although there is much evidence of changing family lives (O’Connor *et al.*, 2000). There have been few studies of families’ experiences and perspectives with respect to involvement in higher education. We wanted to extend our studies (Reay 1995, 1998a, 1998b David *et al.*, 1996) of mothers’ involvement to higher education and illustrate how gender plays a significant part in the processes of choice and involvement in higher education (Morley, 1999).

The moves from elite to mass higher education have provided new opportunities and new constraints for young people from different ethnic, family and social class backgrounds (Blackburn & Jarman, 1993; Reay 1998b). They have also led to new ways of theorising the concept of social class. In particular, the increasing fragmentation of social class has been conceptualised as ‘new fractions’ of the middle classes (Savage *et al.*, 1992; Bernstein 1996). We wanted to explore these new concepts in relation to young people and their parents from various social class, ethnic and family backgrounds and relate these to other studies (Reay 1998b; Ball *et al.*, 2002). Archer and Hutchings (2000, p. 572) have explored different concepts of social class and how working-class students talk about families’ involvement and their constructions of identities through higher education (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Archer *et al.*, 2001).

## Gender and the Processes of Student Involvement

Our study drew on critical feminist ethnographies to tease out the complex processes. We chose to concentrate on young people from a range of socially and ethnically diverse institutions in London, including a mix of co-educational and single-sex schools to explore different students' perspectives on the processes of choosing higher education. We wanted to study how gender influenced how the students made choices about the involvement of themselves and their families. In fact, more girls chose to talk to us than boys and several talked in collaborative rather than individual ways (see Table V). Moreover, far more girls than boys volunteered to involve their parents in the interviews (see Table VI). These parents tended to be mothers rather than fathers. First, we explore and reflect upon how our methods and gender affected the students and their families who became involved in our study. Then we present illustrations of these new generations of women and men involved in higher education.

We interviewed 120 young people from six different institutions in London as part of an ESRC funded project on student choices of higher education [2]. Most of these young people were in the traditional cohort of 17–20 year-old students applying to university, whilst the others were mature students, returning to study. In this article we only draw on the families of the students from five of the six institutions since we did not interview any parents of mature students at FFEC (Reay *et al.*, 2002). We assumed that these mature students might themselves be parents and would be independent of their families. We interviewed their partners where appropriate. We thus asked the 98 students whether we might interview their parents on the telephone about their views of involvement.

Gender is woven into the fabric of the whole research process: from the selection of the 98 students, to the ways students were interviewed, to student processes of choosing to involve their parents, to parent perspectives in relation to individual, familial and institutional features. The 98 students interviewed were not evenly balanced across

TABLE V. Student interview sample

School/College	Number of students		
	Boy	Girl	Total number
CosmopolitanBoys' (CB)	13		13
Hemsley Girls' (HG)		15	15
Riverway College (RC)	14	12	26
Maitland Union (MU)	15	18	33
Creighton Community School (CCS)	4	7	11
Total number	46	52	98

TABLE VI. Parent sample: gender of the parents and students interviewed

	Number of parents		
	Mothers	Fathers	Total number
Girls	22	3	25
Boys	9	4	13
Total number	31	7	38

gender. As can be seen from Table V, the number of interviewees was slightly skewed towards women, with 52 female and 46 male students choosing to take part. There were far more women amongst the mature students than men, as we had expected (Reay *et al.*, 2002). The 98 students were also not equally distributed across the schools (see Table V). The two single-sex fee-paying schools (CB and HG) together provided a little under a third of the interviewees, with similar numbers of boys (13) and girls (15). The working-class, co-educational, minority ethnic comprehensive school (CCS) provided the smallest number of interviewees (four boys and seven girls), with more girls than boys. There were also more girls in one of the state sixth forms (MU) whilst there were more boys at the other state sixth form (RC). A third of the student interviewees (33 at MU) and a quarter (26 at RC) attended these two socially and ethnically mixed schools and provided virtually equal numbers of males and females (29 and 30 respectively).

We had theoretically sampled to obtain students from working-class families and/or who wanted to attend the more elite universities, such as Oxford or Cambridge. These working-class families provide a contrast with students from CCS, who were also from working-class and chiefly Asian ethnic minority families. Students from middle-class family backgrounds in MU and RC shared some characteristics with the students from the two single-sex schools (CB and HG) since some had transferred from fee-paying schools for their A levels, obviating the need for their parents to invest financially in paying fees.

Overall, fewer boys (33 boys from state schools and 13 boys from the private schools) volunteered than girls (37 girls from state schools and 15 from private schools). Gender is also significant in the ways some of the girls, in contrast to the boys, wished to be interviewed: in pairs rather than individually. Several factors may account for the balance in favour of female students. These are how we elicited volunteers, the fact that two out of three of us were female interviewers, and aspects of our theoretical sampling to ensure representation of certain groups (Reay *et al.*, 2001).

How gender is inflected in the choices to involve parents is connected with our research methods and the processes of choosing universities. We wanted a small number of parents to interview about involvement and tried to elicit names from the 98 students during their interviews but less than four out of five volunteered their parents. We were given 43 names of parents, but we only managed to interview 39 individual parents, as the others proved elusive and too busy. Girls were more willing than boys to allow us to approach their parents: 26 girls (47%) gave us names of their parents out of the 53 girls interviewed. Only 16 boys suggested their parents (30%), although there were not that many fewer boys interviewed (45). These differences related to gender perspectives on involvement in education, such as how boys felt about their educational progress, and gender differences in views of autonomy and independence from parents in decision-making.

In particular, two-thirds of the parents we eventually interviewed were suggested by girls, and only one-third by boys. However, the boys proposed their fathers nearly as often as they proposed their mothers whereas the girls suggested mothers far more frequently than fathers. The four parents who proved elusive to speak to were all fathers, three of whom were suggested by their sons, and one by a daughter. They were also all mentioned to our one male interviewer, suggesting some elements of over-determination in terms of masculinity of methodology as well as the gendering of choosing universities and parental involvement (Oakley, 2000). The gender balance of the parents was three mothers to every one father.

Why were girls more willing to volunteer their parents? The reasons linked with the

characteristics of parent–child, and especially mother–daughter, relations; the particular form and social class of the families; their educational involvement; and the nature of our study. How the three interviewers elicited parents may have been a factor in the selective nature of our sample. The two women tended to be relatively more successful with gaining access to girls’ rather than boys’ parents, whereas the male interviewer obtained positive replies from several boys to interview their fathers.

Both the female and male students, who volunteered their parents, suggested mothers far more often than fathers. A third of the parents were from lone mother households, suggesting that it might have been easier to volunteer a parent with whom they lived. However, girls volunteered mothers far more often than boys. This was especially the case at HG where we obtained half of the mother interviews of daughters. All 10 of the 15 girls interviewed who volunteered a parent suggested their mothers. Many of the mothers worked. However, despite maternal employment as well as paternal employment, a rather typical response was that, in those families where fathers were present, they would be too busy working and would not want to be disturbed.

There was a marked contrast between the girls at HG and the boys at CB, both independent schools, illustrating complex intersections of gender and social class. Less than half the boys interviewed at CB volunteered their parents, many saying that they were too busy or they did not feel it appropriate. The boys ‘chose’ parental non-involvement, although they recognised that their parents were supportive, interested and had invested in the school as the appropriate locale for university choice. The boys at RC were also similar to CB in that few of them successfully proposed their parents (with five parents at each school suggested by boys). Only a third of the boys at MU suggested their parents, whilst half of the girls interviewed at both MU and RC did.

The male and female students at CCS, dissimilar from CB in social class terms, were similar to CB in that they also chose not to involve their parents, mentioning their lack of knowledge of higher education. Instead, our teacher contact, Eva, organised a focus group for Bengali parents to which only three parents came. One was the father of a boy student, Khalid, whom we had interviewed, whereas two other parents, a mother and a father, attended but we had not been able to interview their children. We only had one individual interview with a father of a daughter (out of seven female student interviews at CSS).

Most of the students—over half the girls and two-thirds of the boys—did not want us to approach their parents. Both boys’ and girls’ main reasons related to their views of their parents’ interests, ability to be involved and involvement in work. Their reasons about their parents’, and their own, views were partly gender-linked. The supposition that their parents—whether in lone or two-parent households—were too busy and/or at work was shared by boys and girls across the social classes. The perception that parents could not contribute since they had no experience on which to draw was offered most by working-class students whose parents had not attended higher education. Khalid (CCS) expressed his reasons for not involving his parents strongly:

I’ve got a lot of brothers and sisters so it is really difficult for [my parents] to give a lot of attention to just one. I have got seven brothers and including me that is eight, and two sisters ... so I didn’t get any advice at all; like I said, they left it all to me.

All the students at CCS had parents who were working and had very little time. They did not want to disturb their parents, who could not help, as Khalid had intimated.

Many students did not want their parents to be involved in discussing their perspec-

tives on the processes of choice. Gender was significant in that boys tended not to want parents to be involved as they felt that they would intrude on their lives at school. The boys at the state schools did not want parents to focus on their schoolwork as many of them felt that they were behind in their assignments and doing poorly in practice examinations. Thus, the reasons varied from protecting their parents or themselves from an intrusion into their more personal family matters, to the evaluation of a process in which parents were deemed not to be relevant. These differences map on to similar views that were found in a study of children's understandings of parental involvement in their schooling (Edwards & Alldred, 2000).

Gender was salient in how girls were involved in the study and how they involved their mothers. At both of the two state sixth forms—MU and RC—we interviewed some girls in pairs rather than individually. These girls also suggested that we interview their mothers, mentioning how they too had cooperated in supporting their choices.

### **Gender and the Parents Interviewed**

The complex interplay between gender and families, social class, ethnicity and institutional features is linked to the complexity of educational and social changes across the generations, and it affected our study. Thus, the parent sample was highly selective and selected, illustrating these differences in the interrelationships of gender, education, family and social class. As can be seen from Table VI, 80% of our parent interview sample consisted of mothers (31 out of 38), mainly but not exclusively of daughters. There were 22 mothers of female students (10 from HG, 8 from MU, 4 from RC) and nine mothers of male students (5 from RC, 1 from MU, 3 from CB).

A majority of mothers is not unusual with respect to interviews with parents of schoolchildren in either primary or secondary education, as shown in several significant studies (Edwards *et al.*, 1989; David *et al.*, 1994). However, a majority with respect to higher educational choice processes is unusual, since we expected, from past studies, that fathers would be more concerned given the greater financial 'risks' now associated with higher education (David *et al.*, 1997). The fact that we interviewed more mothers suggests that mothers remain the more regularly responsible parent, whatever the gender of the child. They may be more involved because of family changes to living in lone parent households, which are mainly female-headed (Duncan & Edwards, 1997, 1999; Haskey, 1998). It links also with changes in the gender gap in higher education.

The mothers came from a diversity of families, matching the patterns of family life in late modernity. Getting a picture of the students' households was complicated because many families and children 'naturalise' their relationships, whilst others mentioned step-parents (Ribbens-McCarthy *et al.*, 2000). Over a third of the mothers interviewed were lone parents (12 out of 31), whilst only one father was. The sample consisted of three widowed parents. The two widows were from HG, where there were also two mothers who were lone parents, making lone parents at this school a higher proportion than in the overall sample.

Almost half of the mothers of daughters whom we interviewed came from HG. HG was very different from the boys' independent school (CB) in gender perspectives and the three state co-educational schools, in that it was predominantly upper middle class and professional. There was a close relationship between the girls' education and the educational involvement of their mothers at HG. This was about being supportive of the education offered by the school as an extension of home. This did not entail close



involvement in the daily processes of choice, such as going on visits to universities with their daughters. Intensive parental involvement, in terms of support and interest at home, was linked to gender and professionalism of the upper middle-class mothers. All the HG mothers mentioned that they felt happy with leaving the processes of application and visits to the school, in whom they had great faith.

The other mothers of the female students (eight from MU and four from RC) were from the sixth form college/consortium and came from across a range of social and ethnic groups. They told us about their collaborative and cooperative approaches that were clearly emulated by their daughters. No mothers were individually interviewed at CCS (and only one mother came to the focus group), typifying a traditional approach to higher education from minority ethnic families in a working-class institutional location. We also interviewed nine mothers of sons (five from MU, three at CB and one from RC), who were mainly employed and lone mothers from ‘fractions’ of the middle classes (Ball *et al.*, 2002).

The total number of fathers interviewed was only seven. There were two from CCS. One father (Sarah’s, from an African background) was unusual in that he was unemployed but a school governor, and had higher educational qualifications. The other father (Khalid, Asian) attended the focus group arranged by Eva. There he presented his attitudes to higher education, as our field notes demonstrated:

Eva has organised a session for Bengali parents. Ahmed, a ‘successful’ ex-pupil now at medical school has come back to talk to them about the university experience. I am there initially to talk about finances in the hope that parents will stay on afterwards to talk to me about how they feel about their child going to university. Rasmid, the translator, is going to remain behind to translate for me ... All three parents had left school in Bangladesh without any formal qualifications. I asked about their parents’ attitudes and Khalid’s father laughed and said: in our youth parents did not have attitudes to education, they had attitudes to work and you had to go out and earn money for your family as soon as possible.

The two CCS fathers were contrasts in ethnicity (Asian versus African) and educational background (early school leaver versus PhD) but very similar in traditional patriarchal approaches to parenthood. Three fathers were from RC, with two fathers of sons and one a daughter. The other two fathers were of a son at CB and a daughter at MU. No fathers of sons were interviewed from MU, pointing to the predominance of lone mother families, and no fathers of daughters from HG. It may be that we had proportionately more fathers from RC—three out of eight parents—because our male interviewer conducted several interviews there.

Six of the seven fathers interviewed were from two-parent families. Four were fathers of sons—one from CCS, one from CB, who was recently made redundant and at home, whilst his wife was at work; and two fathers were from middle-class ‘fractions’ at RC. Two fathers of girls were from two-parent families and one was a widower. These three fathers were relatively atypical: Sarah’s father (CCS, African PhD); one volunteered himself (Sandra at RC) as more involved than his wife (who came from Switzerland and lacked knowledge of English higher education); and another volunteered because he was a widower (Sharon’s father at MU).

### Gender, Higher Education Involvement and ‘Habitus’

We had selected the five schools to represent a range of male and female students from different family, social class and minority ethnic backgrounds in order to explore the notions of ‘institutional’ and ‘familial habitus’ (Reay, 1998b). We wanted to follow through previous theories about the interplay of educational changes on men and women’s lives in different social class and institutional locations, extending Bourdieu’s notion of habitus (1993, p. 88). We also wanted to examine the specific influences of educational changes on women’s lives and others aspects of ‘familial habitus’. ‘Institutional habitus’ was important in that the schools had different approaches to parental involvement, ethos and culture for sons and daughters (McDonough, 1996). The links between institutional and familial habitus were that parents begin to acquire a shared perspective about education from the institutional habitus, especially when they had chosen a particular school to ‘match’ their initial familial expectations. However, there were also gender differences linked to social class.

Parental involvement in their children’s choice processes was clearly influenced by institutional habitus. The parents of children in private schools tended to have a rather ‘hands off’ and professional approach to close involvement. They had invested heavily in the private school and could afford this. The highly educated, elite families who had chosen private education tended to have more affinity with the schools and a professional, educational engagement. HG and CB offered support that built upon parents’ private activities but some lone mothers still felt that the school was not sufficiently helpful to their child (Hugh at CB and Melissa at HG). In the state schools, the middle-class parents exhibited more anxieties and fear of their children’s failure (Ehrenreich, 1989). In particular, the mothers tended to be more proactive in terms of involvement, especially with their daughters. There were also class differences in familial habitus in that the middle classes attempted to reproduce their own educational patterns whilst the working-class parents wanted to transform their children’s educational fates.

Differences emerged between the five institutions in the dominant familial habitus and perspectives on higher education, although parental choices of state or private secondary education did not fit neatly with educational and family backgrounds. However, the parents of students in private schools tended to be the most highly educated. The parents interviewed were very highly educated, with only six not having a university education, but the kind of higher education varied [3]. Most parents of boys at CB and girls at HG valued elite higher education, such as Oxford or Cambridge because of their own, their partners’, or grandparent/relative experiences of it. The divorced mother of Hugh (CB) had not experienced higher education, but her father had gone to Cambridge. The picture was much more mixed at MU and RC, since four students had transferred to RC and MU from private schools after GCSEs (the General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations), and from families in which a parent, usually the father, had been to Oxford or Cambridge. Others were from ‘fractions’ (Savage *et al.*, 1992, Ball *et al.*, 2002) of the middle class, where parental education was from higher educational institutions that were redbrick, traditional universities or new universities created from the 1960s to the 1990s (David & Woodward, 1998).

The parental sample was skewed towards the highly educated middle classes, but with differences in various ‘fractions’ of the middle classes and between mothers and fathers. The six parents from working-class families saw higher education as necessary because of the changes that they perceived in the labour market. One mother of a girl (Anne) from MU, and two fathers of sons (Stewart and Michael) from RC, not having

experienced higher education, saw it as vitally important for their children's future success. Some parents had obtained professional qualifications that would now be part of higher education, such as teaching and accountancy, making them a lower middle-class 'fraction'. For example, Joshua's mother (RC, Black African) told us:

*I:* If I remember correctly Joshua said that you attended university yourself.  
*J's mother:* He probably assumed that I did. I didn't. And the reason I didn't is because university was not really the right channel for me, to do my course, because I am a professional accountant ... in my day, sometimes they beg you to come and take a job. I remember being begged to take computer training in Barclays Bank ... and they would pay me the full amount, the full salary, and I would have full training and I wasn't interested, because I wasn't interested in computing. If I knew it was so money spinning now maybe I should have gone for it.

Joshua's mother illustrated how dramatic changes in higher education had been through her own biography. She was like all the parents we interviewed, seeing higher education as axiomatic and automatic, whatever their own educational biography and choice of school. She also told us:

*I:* ...just when in your mind did you begin to think about Joshua going to university?  
*J's mother:* Oh, it's been on my mind all along that he's going.  
*I:* Can I ask you why?  
*J's mother:* Because it's very important, education is important and university gives him a good background to the next step in his career ... because if you attend university it gives you at least a leeway in comparison and gives you more opportunities when you get there, than those who are in job training.

However, some mothers who had assumed that their children were going to higher education responded to their own specific circumstances, family dynamics and the child's gender. Several sons, especially at state schools, had not wanted to involve their parents because they were not doing well at school. Will's mother (MU, white middle class) chided herself. Their son was both 'laid back' and resistant to the process, having 'messed up' his UCAS (Universities and College Admissions) form. She told us that they had not started the application process early enough despite the fact that she taught in an art college and her husband had been to Oxford:

Well, when we first started to think about it? I suppose it was rather too late really. I suppose we did start to think about it at the beginning but we didn't quite realise, you know, how early we had to apply, you know, for universities and stuff. And neither did he ... He couldn't get it together to fill in the form, and he gave it to me so late, but by that time, the big thing really, that we didn't know, that we didn't realise, was his predicted grades had such an influence on, you know, the UCAS form. And how important the predicted grades were, if we'd known we'd have pushed him harder in his mocks, you know, or chivvied him a bit more last year.

Thus, gender, family dynamics and commitment to higher education played a part, whether or not the parents had been in higher education.

### Gender and Mothers' Perspectives on their Involvement

The mothers of the daughters we interviewed were all from HG, the independent school, or RC and MU, the two state sixth forms. Most of them were from various 'fractions' of the middle classes and had attended higher education, and all were eager for their daughters to achieve. As we have already noted, the 10 upper middle-class mothers at HG tended to have professional perspectives and were not involved in a daily way. The lower middle-class mothers at RC and MU provide an illustration of how the expansion of higher education has influenced gender and familial habitus, linked to institutional habitus. These 12 mothers at RC and MU had developed proactive and pragmatic perspectives towards their daughters' higher education. They were all anxious to ensure that their daughters entered higher education. However, their approaches to involvement contrasted with the fathers' perspectives. Several of them had cooperated in rather typical 'feminist' ways, and some of their daughters had emulated these approaches.

We interviewed three pairs of girls—one at RC and two at MU—who had extremely close friendships and were keen to go together to universities and collaborate over the whole process. All three pairs of their mothers, despite dissimilar social and educational backgrounds, also cooperated over the processes of involvement. They also held strong views and directly influenced how their daughters made their choices, by rejecting certain choices that their daughters had made (Ball *et al.*, 2000).

The pair of girls at RC—Kamie (South American black) and Marcia (black)—were both from minority ethnic families and their mothers had been determined that their daughters would go to university, although they themselves had not been. Both mothers told us that they had not had as much opportunity as their daughters had thought.

*I:* When did you first start to think about what Kamie would do when she left school?

*K's mother:* When she was in year 11, yeah.

*I:* And did you or your husband go to university yourselves?

*K's mother:* No, no, I'm not with Kamie's dad any more and I didn't have that opportunity. When I came over here I went into nursing and I trained as a nurse. In those days they didn't have to go to university to do nursing.

Similarly, Marcia's mother told us:

*M's mother:* Yeah, long before she took her GCSEs, she knew quite clearly what she wanted to do from a very early age.

*I:* She also said that you were the biggest influence on her choices. And I wondered how you felt you had influenced her?

*M's mother:* The biggest influence on her choices? I certainly didn't influence her to go for acting.

*I:* For De Montfort.

*M's mother:* Or, oh, you mean choice of ...

*I:* I think both. She was talking about the whole UCAS process. And what she decided to do and where she decided to go. She said if she had to think of who was the biggest influence it would be you.

*M's mother:* Right, OK, well there were places that I definitely did not want her to go to. Because she got an interview, I can't remember the name of the uni, but I think it was Salford in Manchester. I said no, no way you are going there.

*I:* Why?

*M's mother:* Because I know Manchester ... so I thought, no way. You know,

they are calling it Gunchester these days. I said no. First time away from home, you are certainly not going there. I wouldn't feel that she was safe ... well, maybe to a degree because I did say no, you are not going there. I really didn't want her to go too far.

The mothers demonstrated their commitments to their daughters' higher education by expressing financial anxieties as well as potential worries about particular locations:

*I:* And that saving, were you thinking about going to uni for Kamie, the ...

*K's mother:* That was not with that purpose in mind at the time, when I started it. That was just for her to be able to have something. You know, to start off with, rather than, you know, but obviously it will come in handy with the university and whole system changing. Because I mean, you know, the loans are a lot and stuff like that but at the end of the day I don't see why they have to take out a loan in the first place ... but it's all such a strain for them. I mean, it's good for them to learn to live on a tight budget and manage you know ... I think for children of ordinary families a student loan is a must.

*M's mother:* Funding is a huge concern, because, well she's put in an application for a grant but we still haven't heard yet, so I don't know how I really am going to manage with the costs of living with her living away from home ... but I'll try as much as possible to help her so that she doesn't have to take loans out.

These two minority ethnic mothers provided practical support, by vigorously pursuing long-term ambitions that their daughters go to university, despite major financial obstacles. Similarly, the two pairs of mothers from MU were practically supportive of their daughters (Anne and Miah; Cassie and Nancy). Anne's mother (working class, two-parent) told us how involved she had been, together with Anne's friend Miah's mother (lower middle class, lone mother), whilst sharing financial worries. They went on visits to universities with their daughters together, providing models of cooperation.

She also went, her mother and I trotted off to Cambridge ... Miah's mum ... And I think she had very much the same experience with the school. I mean we were really in the dark and we hadn't anybody to talk to the girls about it at all, you know, except for private things that we have managed to do ourselves ... yeah we went up to Pembroke, to the Pembroke open day and trotted around and then I think Miah applied to Pembroke and Anne applied to Kings ... but finances are very much a concern. I work termtime only and her dad's a postman and we earn under £30,000 between us.

Miah's mother (MU), a university-educated lone parent with financial insecurities and a part-time job at a new university in London, told us:

Obviously I knew she was going into higher education but I didn't know what direction it was ... I've supported her quite a bit, with the French, because I did a degree in French as well ... I went to Cambridge with her for a pre sort of look, for an open day, that's all because it was near.

Cassie's mother (MU, black, lone parent and teacher), whose daughter also collaborated with a close friend, Nancy, also went on trips together with Nancy's mother. She put a somewhat different gloss on the story about the choice processes, referring to having to control her strong influence. She also mentioned the pressures that ex-partners as absent fathers sometimes exert:

I went through the prospectuses and I mean I have to be careful because I can be overbearing sometimes and my mum kept reminding me, Lorraine it's her

course ... When we all went, because I went up on the open day with Cassie and Nancy to Chester ... I've been through university quite recently. I went as a mature student to do a BEd at North London. I qualified seven years ago ... her dad also studied at the same time as I did. And he's a social worker. And we are not together anyway, but he was pushing North London an awful lot, saying me and your mum went there, you know, what's the matter with you going there. He was actually very worried about Cassie going away. Very worried.

Cassie also had mentioned the pressure that her father was exerting on her to go to a particular university. Anne's working-class father was a postman and was far more distant than Cassie's non-residential father who had been to university. These proactive, anxious mothers from lower middle-class 'fractions' report having to deal with fathers' hopes and fears, for daughters and sons. Such intensive maternal involvement in higher education choices also entails regulating fathers' involvement.

The mothers', and daughters', accounts revealed similarities between two-parent and lone parent families where fathers had been to university. University-educated fathers tended to influence the process by trying to 'lay down the law'. For example, two sons of lone mothers (Marcus and Richard at MU) also mentioned the pressure that their fathers had exerted. Richard's mother, a divorced lone parent (MU), said:

It was a huge issue between us because my ex-husband has always been very pro Oxford and I didn't think it was the right thing for Richard and nor did Richard, and there was a big internal disagreement in the family about it ... Richard is not really interested in developing fine art.

Absent fathers were often perceived, by mothers, daughters and sons, to be difficult and authoritarian about higher education choices, although not all absent fathers were influential. In the private school institutional habitus, Melissa's father (HG, lone mother family) was completely absent from the picture whilst the two widows (HG) aimed to integrate their late husbands' educational experiences and perspectives.

### **Gender and Fathers' Perspectives on Parental Involvement**

All the fathers whom we interviewed were more individualistic in their approaches than the mothers, although their perspectives differed according to the gender of the child, their own educational backgrounds or familial habitus. Given that we had only one father from CB, it is difficult to link differences with institutional habitus, but there were gender differences. The four fathers of sons expressed their individualistic involvement in terms of concern about their sons' future employment prospects. The extremely involved, highly educated fathers of daughters (one each at RC, MU and CCS) did so pragmatically because they each felt that the school was not sufficiently supportive. Their perspectives also raise the same concerns about the institutional habitus of RC and MU that the mothers had expressed.

The fathers of daughters offered examples of intensive parenting but on an individualistic rather than cooperative basis. Sharon's father (and late mother, MU) had been to an elite university whereas Sandra's father (RC) had been to a redbrick university. Sandra's father told us about a range of issues in relation to his daughter:

I don't know when we started thinking about what Sandra might do after school. I suppose it's been in the back of our minds over the past year ... but university was not necessarily an expectation in Sandra's case because we were

never quite sure how well she would do at A levels. I mean, we hoped she would ... yes I mean we would like her to go into something that at least gave her some further training of some sort ... but she hasn't been terribly proactive in terms of trying to explore some options ... I guess my wife and I sort of forced the issue on the university front ... we looked at a few websites to get information ... I think she's found it very very stressful ... she's not particularly strong academically and I suppose like any of us at that age, or most of us at that age, doesn't have a strong view of the way her career might develop ... [but] finances are not such a worry. We had the added advantage in her older sister's case that she is my stepdaughter and not my daughter. I was surprised to find out, just before she went, that my salary isn't taken into account for grant purposes ... But in Sandra's case it's not an issue. I mean it's only her that we will have to pay for in terms of going through university, so money is not really a deciding factor in that. We'll support her through that.

Sharon's father (MU) was equally supportive of his daughter. He too had always expected her to go to university but had started to consider it seriously when she was about 12:

I probably may have thrown away a few statements about it being important, and important to go to a good university but not any details ... but the school has no drive or enthusiasm for getting the students to Oxbridge ... I'm rather annoyed about it to be honest, because, you see, what happened is I raised the matter with Sharon, you know, because she got an A star in French one year before everyone else and we actually went up to the Cambridge open day. Nothing to do with the school. I organised the trip ... And when I'd raised points about going to Cambridge she didn't sort of, you know, she said she didn't want to go, they were class-ridden and all that business. They weren't her sort of people ... she was put off Oxford by Exeter College ... that requires a book, not an article really ... there was an exercise in reverse discrimination from this college. What happened was there was a mentoring course, you know, where she could go down there to go round the college. Then the school said to her she couldn't go because she was English ... she then missed the deadlines for applying to Cambridge ... I just feel I let Sharon down really. Because I think I should have gone on to her, and been more ... because we had arguments with her about Cambridge at the beginning, we both got stressed out about it and then I dropped the thing for a long time, I just raised it diffidently ... And unfortunately that was the critical time when I should have been pressing it you see.

Sharon's father was unusually involved. This 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. However, both he and Sandra's father referred to the mothers' views and expectations since they had been teachers and had hoped that their daughters would have a more satisfying career. Both fathers were individually pursuing better careers for their daughters.

## **Conclusions**

Our study has revealed that the expansion of higher education and changes in the gender

balance such that more women are now involved have contributed to gender differences in perspectives across different classes, families and minority ethnic groups. Gender, linked to social class, ethnicity and education, was highly salient in all the processes of choice of higher education. We found that more girls than boys were willing to participate in our study, and that they were more willing than boys to volunteer their parents, mainly their mothers, for interviews. Moreover, far more mothers than fathers were willing to be interviewed. Although we speculated that some of the differences might have to do with our research methods and our gender, the predominance of mothers in the study can be linked to changes in the gender balance in higher education and their perspectives on their children's futures.

There were significant differences in terms of gender, linked to both familial and institutional habitus. Girls tended to pursue more collaborative strategies than boys. Boys tended not to want parents to intrude on their lives at school, some because they were not progressing well in their studies and others because of their desire for independence and autonomy from parents. Girls were far more willing to engage their parents, mothers especially, in how they went about choosing higher education. However, both boys and girls who did not want to involve their parents offered notions about their parents' work or lack of knowledge of higher education as the main reasons. In particular, the institutional habitus of the working-class, minority ethnic state school was rooted in an ethos of parental passivity and non-involvement on grounds of lack of knowledge of higher education (Reay, 1998b).

We also found differences in terms of gender, social class, institutional and familial habitus, over types of professional and pragmatic involvement. These mapped on to Reay's initial theories about higher education choices (Reay, 1998b). Upper middle-class mothers who had been in higher education and chose private schools tended to have a professional engagement with higher education choices, whilst more middle-class 'fractious' mothers tended to be more proactive and pragmatic, anxious to ensure their children's educational successes. These lower middle-class mothers were intensively involved with encouraging their daughters, across racial and ethnic boundaries. All the mothers of daughters tended to be intensively and highly involved in their daughters' educational progress, whether they were professional or pragmatic. The fathers that we interviewed tended to be unusual and unusually involved in their children's education. We especially noted the intensity and individualism of the involvement of the three fathers with their daughters. However, we also noted that many fathers were reported, in the interviews with their wives or ex-wives and children, both sons and daughters, to be concerned about their forms of investment in education. Middle-class families invested heavily in their student children, and fathers, whatever their familial habitus and household, tried to control the choice process. Some intensive mothers reported having to control their partners or ex-partners.

Gender is indeed highly significant in higher education choice processes. Boys and girls differ in how they are involved in education and choice processes, illustrating changing forms of young people's gendered identities and subjectivity. They also differ in how they engage their mothers and fathers in the processes and boys tend to be more resistant to involvement, seeing it as intrusive or irrelevant. Mothers and fathers similarly differ in their involvement in terms of intensity and influence, but changes in higher education have led to more engagement in the processes of choice, illustrating changing institutional and familial habitus. These changing perspectives demonstrate gendered, racialised and classed reflexivity about parental involvement in choices of higher education.



## NOTES

- [1] All statistics are from the source *Education and Training Statistics for the UK*. This is an Office of National Statistics (ONS) and Department for Education and Skills annual publication. For these tables we used the editions 1990 and 2001. See <<http://www.statistics.gov.uk>> and <<http://www.dfes.gov.uk>>.
- [2] Our project involved two cohorts of students, their parents and various intermediaries (career teachers, sixth form tutors) in six educational institutions in London: an 11–18 mixed comprehensive with a large minority ethnic working-class intake (Creighton Community School—CCS); a comprehensive sixth form consortium serving a socially diverse community (Maitland Union—MU); a tertiary college with a large A level population (Riverway College—RC); a further education college which runs higher education access courses (Fennister FE college—FFEC); two private schools, one single-sex boys' (Cosmopolitan Boys'—CB) and one single sex girls' (Hemsley Girls'—HG). We administered a questionnaire to 502 year 12 and 13 students, ran focus groups and interviewed subsamples.
- [3] All 98 students interviewed had highly educated parents. At HG, both parents of all 15 girls had university education; at CB, only three—all Asian—were first generation to university from 13 families. At MU, most parents—10 of the 18 girls and 13 of the 15 boys were university educated and only 10, less than a third of the 33 students, first generation university students. At RC, a minority were first generation students, whilst the reverse was true of CCS, with only 4 out of 11 fathers with degrees.

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