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Understanding Experiences of High Achieving Sixth-form Students Through the Oxbridge Application Process

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand the experiences and decision-making processes of a distinct sixth form student cohort of high achievers based in a sixth form college in the North West of England. These students are identified as having gained seven grade 7s at GCSE upon entry to the college and are therefore placed on a separate pastoral programme known for the purposes of this study as the STAR cohort. Being a pastoral manager of the STAR cohort, I have witnessed the students hopes and disappointments in applying to elite universities and was conscious that studies of such groups remained an under-researched and under-theorised area of study (Mendick and Francis 2012). Therefore, this thesis seeks to understand this lived experience of being a high achieving student, shining a light on their preparation and decision making in applying to Oxford and Cambridge universities and also documenting and explaining how their understanding is informed. Undertaking research during the Covid-19 pandemic and utilising ethnographic techniques of interviews and focus groups informed by Bourdieusian field theory, this thesis finds the experience of these students to be one of pressure with a systematic and relentless focus on grades. In addition, the student experience of applying to elite universities was often an obscuration: lacking transparency and clarity at each stage of the process and more akin to an arbitrary game of chance than a fair process. The STAR cohort felt that they bore full responsibility for any failure during the application process, resulting in low confidence and a sense of being a hesitant underdog. Moreover, the research suggests that the move to online interviewing and online Widening Participation programmes by Oxbridge post-lockdown only intensified this obscuration of the application process. Therefore, this thesis will contribute a fresh understanding in explaining the experience of being a high achieving sixth form student and will also address potential issues in the application process for how students in England apply to Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Thus, this study will be of use to teachers and educators in the post-16 sector and stakeholders and admissions tutors involved in the Oxbridge application process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and overview

Brief introduction to the object of study

My object of study arose from observations in my professional capacity as a teacher of sixth form students for over 20 years. My role is currently within a Sixth Form College (referred to from this point on as the pseudonym of Northwest Sixth Form College) as a pastoral manager of a cohort of high achieving sixth form students. There are currently about 550 students across the two years of A-Level who make up this cohort (in a college of approximately 2600 students) and they arrive at College with at least seven grade 7s at GCSE often with medic or 'Oxbridge' (Oxford or Cambridge university) aspirations – these will be referred to using the pseudonym of the 'STAR cohort' or being part of the 'STAR programme' (such students could be considered as 'most able' (Ofsted 2013) and a thorough discussion of how high achieving students are defined generally and in the context of this study will take place in Chapter 2).

My role is fully funded by Northwest Sixth Form College to help and support STAR students in making their next steps after Sixth Form college. A great emphasis is placed on students gaining places at Russell Group universities (Pigden and Moore 2019) and in particular supporting students to apply for Oxford and Cambridge Universities. As a pastoral manager, the college invests in myself and my department to seek out opportunities that will enrich STAR students such as university workshops or academic programmes and also to put in place a package of support that will enable the STAR students to apply for elite universities such as help with personal statement writing, interviewing and additional examinations. In my eight years at the Sixth Form College, I have overseen more than 50 students gain a place at Oxbridge with a success rate of roughly 20% in terms of numbers applying versus gaining an offer from Oxbridge.

During my time within the college I have observed how these students have made their way in life through the decisions they have had to make and the encouragement they have been given in the belief that every young person should

have the same opportunity to do their best. I have witnessed their hopes and disappointments and have come to question the basis of their selection and rejection from elite universities and whether this was fair and equitable. Early on in my research journey, two key incidents occurred in which one STAR student (who had achieved the highest grades in her GCSEs and subsequently her A-levels) was unsuccessful in her Oxbridge application and another student who had gained a place at Oxbridge, decided to decline it. I was struck by the potential unfairness of this process, questioning why very high achieving state school sixth formers were not getting the opportunities they deserved and even when they did gain an Oxbridge place, they instinctively felt that the most rational choice to make was to opt to turn the place down. This was reinforced by a Sutton Trust report detailing how low application and acceptance rates were to Oxbridge from Sixth Form Colleges compared to independent schools (Montacute and Cullinane 2018:3). I wanted to make sense of the social practice of what it felt like to be a high achieving student and to understand particular struggles in the decision-making processes in applying to Oxford or Cambridge Universities. I was curious about what the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu 1990) were and if any hidden structures existed and needed to be uncovered.

Therefore, my object of study is to explore the authentic experience of high achieving sixth form students on the STAR programme, uncovering how these actors understand and make sense of Sixth Form life and how they negotiate the application process to elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. In shining a light on an under-researched and under-theorised area of study (Mendick and Francis 2012), I will look to uncover how such structures operate within various fields from the STAR students' perspective and in their own voices, and in turn how this affects their dispositions.

Research questions

Conducting research in a Sixth Form College with high achieving STAR students presents a unique opportunity to capture both the authentic experience of these

students and also to understand the challenges in going through the Oxbridge application process. Therefore, the research questions are:

- What are the students' lived experiences of being identified as a high achieving Sixth Form Student?
- What is the lived experience of high achieving students in preparing and going through the Oxbridge application process?
- How are their decisions informed in applying to Oxbridge?

My research questions are designed to first understand from a student perspective what the experience of being high achieving actually means in the context of their actions taken, decisions made and the undertaking of everyday life as part of the STAR cohort. Whilst there is a need to understand at a background level how students are recognised as high achieving, this study is not about how intelligence is 'measured' or how students are identified as being high achieving. Nor is it about teaching and learning and how to cater for the needs of the STAR cohort. Rather, it is specific research of post-16 high achieving students on how they experience life *in response* to being identified and labelled. Secondly, having understood their experience of being part of the STAR cohort, I wanted to comprehend how the students perceived their experience in relation to the process of applying to Oxford and Cambridge universities. This will provide an in-depth analysis of the decision-making processes and the dispositions of high achieving students around the key tenets of the Oxbridge process; application, interview and acceptance/rejection, and the central agents occupying these critical points. Crucially, my research questions consciously seek to understand the *lived* experience because I seek to understand the student experience in their own words and from their own perspective (Coleman, Micko, Cross and Robins 2015: 359-60) - this will be elucidated further in chapter 3. Thus, I hope this research will give fresh insight into the experience of high achieving students and their experiences of the Oxbridge application process.

Therefore, having briefly introduced my object of study and research questions, this thesis will first outline the context and site of where the research took place before

giving a brief understanding of my own positionality. This chapter will conclude with an overview of the structure of this thesis and order of chapters.

The development of the idea of the Sixth Form

In England and Wales, the idea of Sixth Form and sixth form students is often associated with the latter stages of a child's teenage years (ages 16-19) and seen as a transition stage between school and university or work (Shenton 2021: 5). Although sixth form education has existed in different guises (most often in private schools) for many years (Ball 2017), the publication and subsequent adoption of the Crowther Report (Central Advisory Council for Education (England) 1959) heralded the possibility of Sixth Form education for the masses, meaning that more students than ever before stayed on at school after 16 years of age. This followed a progressive increasing of the school leaving age from 15 in 1947 to 16 in 1972 and finally ending with the raising of the compulsory participation age in full time education or training to 18 in 2015 (Woodin, McCulloch and Cowan 2013). This has currently made studying in a Sixth Form environment (either in a school, Sixth Form college or Further Education College) the most common route for 16-19 years olds (Department for Education 2017).

Sixth Form Colleges themselves were first introduced in the UK in the 1960s when some local authorities, in response to the comprehensivisation of schools, sought to centralise sixth form provision in larger institutions (Lumby 2002). This created an uneven distribution centred around large cities such as London, Manchester and Birmingham as well as some counties such as Herefordshire and Worcestershire (Sixth Form Colleges Association 2019). Sixth Form Colleges offer significant advantages particularly around breadth of curriculum and cost effectiveness due to their size and specialisation towards 16-19 year olds and have a reputation for academic excellence (Hodgson and Spours 2015). The curriculum offer is heavily dominated by A-Levels, although most colleges offer a range of vocational qualifications and there is also the opportunity to combine the two areas into mixed study programmes (Godfrey and Elliott 2021). In 2021, 79 Sixth Form Colleges/16-19

academies existed with an average size of just under 2000 students (SFCA 2021). Following the Further and Higher Education Act (DfE 1992), local authority control was relinquished for all Sixth Form Colleges, with them becoming self-governing, centrally funded institutions. In 2015, Sixth Form Colleges were able to have the opportunity to become academies (DfE 2015; Godfrey and Elliott 2021) and indeed, the site of my research – Northwest Sixth Form College – took this route in the late 2010s and became an academy.

Northwest Sixth Form College and the STAR programme

Northwest Sixth Form College is in the North West of England in a socially deprived area which Public Health England (Reference available on request) puts in the worst 15% of the country for unemployment, homelessness, violent crime and overall social deprivation. The STAR programme was set up by the college in the late 2000s to cater for the 'gifted and talented' (Cramond 2004) students that were identified upon starting their studies at the college (see chapter 2 for further discussion on defining high achieving students). The programme was designed to give high achieving students (identified on entry to the college by GCSE results) a different pastoral experience and wider opportunities that would aid and assist in attaining high grades and gaining prestigious university places. The belief by the Senior Leaders at the college at the time (and still is) was that high achieving students needed more experiences and ultimately cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986: 242) to compete with other students across the UK contending for top university places and hence the creation of the programme to meet this need. Thus, from the outset, it should be made clear that the STAR programme is not neutral, rather it is designed to support students in their aspirations by providing wider experiences and support to complement their academic attainment to ultimately be successful in university applications. My role in the development of the STAR programme has seen the programme quadruple in terms of student participants from 120 in 2015 to just over 550 in 2023 and there is now a sustained programme of support and intervention in place alongside a wide variety of opportunities available for STAR

students to enhance their experience. An established suite of recruitment events is also in place for potential STAR students such as open day events and school engagements (my role as an insider researcher will be expanded upon further in chapter 4).

Each student on the programme has a weekly tutorial with other STAR students and is also offered exclusive access to experiences such as trips to universities and subject specific activities such as shadowing schemes. Table 1 (below) details some of the various activities and opportunities available and also gives some insight in to my role as manager of the STAR programme. In addition, Appendix 1 gives an example of a typical STAR student and how the STAR programme has supported them through their two years at Northwest Sixth Form College. STAR students attend their academic lessons with non-STAR students and there is no setting or streaming within their subjects. For any student to access the college there are minimum entry requirements of at least a two 6's, 5's and 4's at GCSE with some subjects having their own specific entry criteria (e.g to study A-Level Maths, students need at least a grade 6 at GCSE).

Table 1: Table showing activities and opportunities offered to STAR students at Northwest Sixth Form College

Level of Activity (approximate number of STAR students)	Type of Activity	My role as STAR Manager
Individual (1)	One-to-one pastoral support, UCAS support, mock interviews	One-to-one support, coaching, mock interview role play, record keeping
Small Group (4-10)	Pastoral coaching, essay support, exam preparation, revision techniques	Presentation preparation and delivery, small group teaching
Whole class (25-30)	Weekly tutorial programme e.g. focus on Independent Learning, UCAS personal statement writing, university preparation classes e.g. financial management	Scheme of work and lesson preparation and delivery, UCAS exemplar support
Whole year cohort (250-275)	Assemblies, compulsory presentations (e.g. PREVENT presentation), Extended Project Qualification opportunity	Assembly preparation and delivery, Extended Project Qualification subject lead

Offered to all STAR students	Widening Participation programmes, University masterclasses, university lectures, Assorted conferences e.g. Medicine conference, Shadowing schemes, STEM days, Mentor schemes. Access days, University Open days	Researching opportunities, connecting students with opportunities, financing trips and visits, accompanying students on visits to various universities

Who are the STAR students?

In the context of my object of study at Northwest Sixth Form College, identification of students for the STAR programme is based purely on GCSE grades with students needing seven grade 7s to be part of the cohort. Potential STAR students are identified during the student application process to the college which begins when the students are in their final year at school (year 11). During this process, applicants to the college are invited to an interview in the Autumn or Spring term of year 11, in which advice and guidance will be given on matters such as course choice and an indication of whether they will potentially gain entry on to the STAR programme calculated through their predicted grades given by their school (usually based on prior assessments/mock examinations). Applicants are then made an offer of a place at Northwest Sixth Form College and upon receipt of their GCSE results in August, enrol at the college to begin their sixth form studies starting in September. Only at enrolment is admission to the STAR programme confirmed with the students meeting the entry criteria. Should students not gain seven grade 7s at GCSE, then they are enrolled for their academic studies and the standard pastoral programme. On occasion there is some flexibility for entry on to the STAR programme, such as students who have an average higher than seven grade 7s but don't have the individual requisite amount (e.g. six grade 9s and two grade 6s) or students who have mitigating circumstances (e.g. students who have had long term medical treatment during the sitting of GCSE's but were predicted very high grades). Ultimately, the decision to admit students on to the STAR programme rests with

myself as STAR manager and my role as gatekeeper to the STAR programme will be discussed clearly and transparently in chapter 4.

The decision to identify high achieving students using prior attainment data is a common practice (Carman 2013) and such definitions and various terminology will be discussed in chapter 2. Indeed, in an analysis of 15 years of research on definitions of 'giftedness', Carman (2013: 58) noted that in comparing over 100 academic articles, in over three quarters of the studies, the most usual method of identifying such students was prior identification by the school (or college). However, in being reflexive, I do recognise that using this identification process based on achievement is fundamentally socially produced (Francis, Skelton and Read 2012: 16) with many factors able to constrain or inflate achievement such as parental income, occupation and qualifications (Lupton, Heath and Salter 2009), socio economic background (Montacute 2018), ethnicity (Loft and Danechi 2020) , gender (Francis and Skelton 2005) or the Covid-19 pandemic (Leahy, Newton, Khan 2021) that began in 2020 (this will be explored further in this and subsequent chapters). Suffice to say that being identified as being eligible for the STAR cohort is a complex issue and far from just being a simple matter of a student being 'clever'. However, although opportunistic, the identification by Northwest Sixth Form College of the STAR cohort by prior-attainment primarily provides a sample frame of identified individuals who would be considered educationally high-achieving without the value-laden approach of myself deciding who should be considered and under what criteria for my object of study. That is not to say that it is value-free or completely objective and this will be discussed further in my role as an insider researcher in chapter 4. Thus, the typical STAR student will have a GCSE grade profile that is similar to the minimum entry requirements required by Oxford or Cambridge universities (University of Oxford 2023) and (as will be discussed in the methodology section in chapter 4), whilst flawed, is the identification process that is used in this research.

Positionality

Having already articulated what my object of study is and my role within Northwest Sixth Form College and the STAR cohort, it is necessary to explain a little about

myself and how this has subsequently informed my research choice and potential key research decisions. Indeed, there is a sense that one needs to understand 'where you are coming from' (Hall 1990) and in this respect my positionality can be seen as an 'individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context' (Holmes 2020: 1). This is an opportunity for me to state my assumptions relating to the research design, context and process (Savin-Baden and Major 2013) and this will be returned to during the methodology (chapter 4), ethical considerations (chapter 4) and reflexivity (chapter 7). This is not to enter the research territory of auto-ethnography (Hannigan 2014) but rather to explain the personal underpinnings of embarking on an academic inquiry and having an awareness of myself as a 'research instrument' (Bourke 2014:2). Indeed, in outlining my position and subsequent reflexivity as an 'insider researcher' (Coghlan and Brannick 2014), my aim is for the research to be strengthened in its awareness of how I may have affected or influenced the research (Grix 2010). Therefore, using Savin-Baden and Major's (2013: 71) guide, I will locate my position in three key areas: the topic under investigation and my personal position; the research participants; and the research design, context and process.

My relationship with the topic choice for the research has predominantly been influenced by my upbringing. I come from a family that consisted of a mother who was a career teacher rising to the position of deputy head and a father whose first job was a teacher and subsequently became a Church of England Minister. Both valued education and encouraged me to do well. I attended a low achieving state school and sixth form college and was supported to apply to university. Significantly, I applied to Oxbridge but was unsuccessful, ultimately gaining a place at a Russell group university. Conversely, my brother attended a fee-paying independent school before gaining a place at Oxbridge. Interestingly, he did not gain a place at one of the Oxbridge institutions but because of the connections from his school was able to pull out of the UCAS system and apply to the other elite institution in the same year and secured a place (this is normally against the UCAS system rules). From a structuralist perspective, it was not until very recently that I had considered the dynamics within the sub-fields that were at play and what actors within this social

practice would have had to utilise for my brother to actually gain a place in the same academic year at Oxbridge when the other Oxbridge institution rejected him. In contrast, my rejection from Oxbridge was clear-cut and there was no safety net or mobilising of contacts to reverse any decisions or have the tenacity to question such decisions and seek alternative routes to an elite university. The fact that over twenty years later, I now find myself in charge of a Sixth Form College programme that oversees Oxbridge applications is an interesting curiosity and has given me an opportunity to conduct research. Therefore, although there are overlaps with my own biography, this is not an angry attempt to right any perceived wrongs, rather, it situates my values and beliefs regarding education from my own personal perspective. Moreover, having witnessed at first hand the role both social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) played in securing a place at Oxbridge, this has given me an insight into the struggle over certain resources and more will be developed in chapter 3 on the utilisation of Bourdieu in my thesis.

Secondly, my position with regards to the research participants will be explored in some detail in Chapter 4 and in particular my role as an 'insider researcher', however there are some salient points to emphasise. As the pastoral manager of the high achieving STAR students that I was researching, I was conscious of the dual role I was occupying, of pastoral tutor (my job role) but also as an academic researcher. Such a position has been described as a 'double edged sword' (Mercer 2007: 1) in that I had unprecedented access to a difficult to reach community of students where I had established trust and could gain authentic voices of experience (Geertz 1973), but also I was perhaps too close, unable to ask the simple questions that an outsider may ask (Naeke, Kurylo, Grabowski, Linton and Radford 2012). Moreover, I was not a passive observer, rather I was an active participant in the student's experience such as supporting them through the Oxbridge application process ranging from encouraging them to apply to writing references or conducting practice interviews. Such a position, whilst sensitive, can be successful if conducted within clear ethical guidelines and the subsequent reflexivity section in chapter 7 will question how this research has shone a light on my own role in running the STAR programme and the Oxbridge application process.

Finally, my position in terms of the research design, context and process is central to the decisions that I have made in robustly seeking a strategy to answer my research questions. Although more depth will be given to this in chapter 4, it is important to note my work biography and its influence. Having graduated in Sociology over 20 years ago and been a Left-leaning Sociology teacher in the state-sector for most of my working life, there has and still is a sense of social justice in my disposition and interactions within the education sector and this can be seen in the initial decision to research my object of study coming from a sense of unfairness – that perhaps the students of the STAR cohort that were within my care were not getting the opportunities that they deserved. Moreover, this has been carried through into the research design: through a sense of trying to get under the skin and understand the lived experience (and potential injustice) for the STAR students (this will be expanded upon in chapter 3); in seeking a structural explanation and set of thinking tools to understand the struggle over resources (see chapter 3 also); and also in undertaking elements of specific research methods (ethnographic techniques) that seek to go beyond description to understand the social practice(see chapter 4 for further explanation). Therefore, in outlining my positionality this research intends to apply the same scrutiny to myself that I gave my object of study (this will be discussed further in chapters 4 and 7).

Before concluding this chapter with an outline of the thesis, the next section will briefly look at the context in which the research took place.

Research and the Covid-19 pandemic

On the 20th March 2020, the majority of schools and colleges across England closed for on-site education apart from for vulnerable children and children of critical workers (Pountney, 2023). This was part of a nation-wide 'lockdown' in which face to face social contact and social mixing was severely restricted in order to minimise the spread of Coronavirus, with the majority of workplaces shutting down or altering their way of working, and most people spending significantly more time at home in their segregated family 'bubbles' (Department of Health and Social Care 2020). For school and colleges this saw the cessation of teaching and learning for

the remainder of the Spring term and patchy provision for learners in terms of the move into online learning in the Summer term. For the first time ever, GCSE and A-level examinations were cancelled and replaced with Centre Assessed Grades (grades assigned by the school or college) that were then adjusted by the controversial Ofqual Algorithim that saw learners from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to be downgraded (Duncan, McIntyre, Storer and Levett 2020). The start of the new term in September 2020 heralded hybrid teaching and learning practices ranging from student bubbles to a mixture of remote and in person teaching and a track and trace programme that could see students sent home to isolate for 10 days if they had come into contact with a positive Covid-19 case. The 2021 new year saw a new lockdown introduced before a gradual re-opening and hybrid teaching and learning from the middle of Spring before the awarding of GCSE and A-level Results in the form of Teacher Assessed Grades (Holmes, Brylka, Case, Clarke, Howard, Keys, Tonin and Cadwallader 2022). The disruption to learning was significant with Leahy, Newton, Khan (2021) finding that during the first lockdown the average student would study between 2 and 4.5 hours per day compared to the pre-pandemic average of 6 hours.

The impact on Northwest Sixth Form College and surrounding area was considerable. Pre-pandemic, life expectancy for males and females in the area was already around 9 years shorter compared with the least deprived areas of England. In December 2020, the local authority had the highest proportion of Covid related deaths in the UK, being ranked the 20th most deprived local authority on the index of multiple deprivation and had seen one of the highest falls in life expectancy due to Covid-19 having a 25% higher mortality for Covid-19 in the area than the rest of England (all references withheld for anonymity but available on request).

The findings that are therefore presented are in the context of this pandemic with research taking place between October 2020 and June 2021 i.e. during the hybrid teaching and lockdown phases. Whilst this could have made research difficult, the magnitude and impact of the pandemic caused a disruption that threw accepted norms and practice into sharp relief and gave a visibility and a different time and space to my object of study. Whilst the research sought not to downplay or trivialise

the hardship or suffering that occurred during a very difficult time, it also saw this interruption as an opportunity to consider established practices amongst the Sixth Form college and the STAR students in a new light and this will be discussed as I set out my theoretical framework in chapter 3 particularly around notions of individual habitus (Bourdieu 1990) and institutional habitus (Reay 1998).

The importance of this study

This initial chapter has sought to outline what the object of study is and the context in which the research will take place. It is important for me to research the authentic experience of high achieving sixth form students and their decision-making processes and dispositions in applying to Oxbridge, because at present, through my role in Northwest Sixth Form College, I perceive there to be a struggle in the social practices of these actors and wish to understand this further.

Therefore, this study aims to push the boundaries of an under researched and under-theorised area of study at a doctoral and academic level. It will contribute a fresh understanding in explaining the student experience of being a high achieving STAR student and will also address potential issues in the applications process of how sixth form students apply to Oxbridge and how their decisions are informed. The study will also contribute new knowledge on the experience of learning and the shift to online working during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, this study will be of use to teachers and educators in the post-16 sector, stakeholders and admissions tutors involved in the Oxbridge application process and it is hoped will promote discussion and robust debate at an academic and social policy level of the Oxbridge application process and the experience of high achieving sixth form students.

Summary and overview of the chapters

This first chapter has given a brief introduction to my object of study alongside my main research questions. It has given some context to the research particularly in

terms of the sixth form college itself, my own positionality and the background to conducting research during the Covid-19 pandemic. The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 details the existing research on high achieving students. It begins with locating the STAR students within the different terminologies within the field. An influential study by Lo and Parath (2017) is then used to frame differing paradigms on how 'gifted' research can be viewed before an overview of 'most able' policy in England takes place. The chapter then goes on to look at the surrounding literature on the student experience of being a high achiever before concluding with an analysis of the Oxbridge application process.

Chapter 3 sets out the theoretical framework through which the research was conducted. This begins with an understanding of what is meant by 'lived experience' before outlining the applicability of the work of Bourdieu and in particular some key concepts such as field, capital and habitus, as well as some lesser known ones such as institutional habitus, hysteresis and conatus. A critique of Bourdieu is also offered, and the chapter concludes by demonstrating how these concepts can work together to generate a theory of practice and how Bourdieu's work informs the methodology.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodology including an ontological and epistemological discussion as well as reference to Bourdieu's notion of an 'epistemological break'. My approach to research is then outlined giving a brief overview of ethnography and how this may be used alongside the Bourdieusian 'toolbox'. Ethnographic techniques of focus groups and interviews are then justified as the best methods to answer my research questions and details of the pilot study are also given. There is a discussion on the notion of being ethical during the research, particularly as an insider researcher, before signposts are given on how the research was transcribed and collated for subsequent analysis.

Chapter 5 is the first of two findings and discussion chapters, seeking to address the research questions. It begins with detailing the initial findings of the focus group

and how this informed the schedule for the subsequent interviews with the high achieving students.

The chapter then reveals the findings that answer the first research question regarding the lived experience of the STAR students, grouping the results around three key sites: the sixth form college, home and online. The subsequent discussion uses Bourdieusian analysis to highlight how the three sites could be considered as sub-fields and the power dynamics within them in terms of the agents that occupy such spaces and the capitals they possess.

Chapter 6 is the second of the findings and discussion chapters and explores the particular sub-field of the Oxbridge Application Process, seeking to address the final two research questions. It begins with the initial findings of the focus groups before explaining how this was developed for the interviews. It reveals how the STAR students consider themselves to be 'Oxbridge material' before going through the findings of each stage of the application process: deciding to apply, writing a personal statement, entrance exam, interviews and the final outcome of acceptance or rejection. The discussion uses Bourdieusian analysis to understand the sub-field and investigates where instances of misrecognition and symbolic violence may have occurred. The chapter concludes with the suggestion that the application process may be unfair and disadvantaging to certain students.

Chapter 7 considers my own position within the research and utilises the Bourdieusian concept of Participant objectification. Through being reflexive, I am able to place myself within my findings and discussion and understand the role I have played, recognising the effect this has had on my own research. The chapter concludes with an admission of the limitations of the research and acknowledging how the research could be improved.

Chapter 8 is the final chapter and provides a conclusion to this thesis. It reflects on the new knowledge that has been generated from this study and the recommendations that can be drawn in terms of practice, both within the sixth form college and for the Oxbridge application process. The chapter draws together the

research by offering signposts for further research and how this study can be built upon. The chapter concludes with an epilogue.

Chapter 2: Scope of reference and literature review

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the terminology used in identifying high achievers, before locating the STAR cohort within the wider academic literature associated with being 'gifted' and the policy context in England and Wales. It will subsequently explore the literature on the experience of high achieving students before investigating the student experience of the Oxbridge application process. In undertaking such a review, this chapter seeks to demonstrate previous literature pertaining to my research questions and how my study acknowledges and incorporates previous academic research.

Who are the 'high achievers' in the STAR cohort?

This section will set out the terrain (both historical and more modern) for high achievement identification and provision in education before giving an overview of the context in England. In its simplest form 'high achievement' or 'high-achievers' is an outcome driven term based on prior achievement purely on a particular performance in an examination or test (Shepherd 2021). In England and Wales, whilst there is no definitive measure or line in the sand, there is a broad consensus that this would constitute grades A*-B at A-level or Key stage 5 (Crawford, Macmillan and Vignoles 2014), grade 7 and above at GCSE level or Key Stage 4 (National Statistics 2023) and level 5 and above at Key Stage 2 (Crawford et al 2014).

However, whilst this may appear straight forward, this does not acknowledge the social and cultural factors that may have aided or hindered such grades (Loft and Danechi 2020) nor does it recognise student potential for high achievement regardless of prior attainment (Shepherd 2021). Moreover, high achievement is often conflated with other terms such as 'gifted and talented' or 'most able' (Francis, Skelton and Read 2012) or sometimes used synonymously (Heller-Sahlgren 2018). This is further compounded by the fact that the majority of identification of 'gifted' or 'most able' students is done through prior achievement (Carman 2013) yielding a convoluted picture of definitions (Wardman and Hattie 2018) in which

high achievers could conceivably be also classed as 'gifted' but 'gifted' students may not be confirmed high achievers. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge the multifaceted and often contentious areas of academic debate surrounding the definitions of such a group of students - terms such as 'gifted', 'gifted and talented', 'able', 'very able', 'most able', 'bright', 'genius' or 'prodigy' have been used at various points in research (Phillips 2001) with Freeman (2005: 81) asserting that there are over 100 definitions alone.

Within the international academic community there is an emphasis on using the term 'gifted' to describe high achievers and although definitions and the way this has been constructed has changed considerably over time, demonstrating both its social construction and historical contingency (the three paradigms presented by Lo and Parath (2017) in the next section demonstrate such changing conceptions), the term has persisted, particularly in the USA and continental Europe with academic journals such as Gifted Child Quarterly still in high circulation. This term is not without criticism with Borland (2005) notoriously questioning what this therefore means for the students who are not identified as 'gifted' and the crudeness of the dichotomisation of the 'gifted and the rest' or 'un-gifted' as he mischievously suggests (Borland 2005: 7). In addition, Sak posits that 'Giftedness is like a diffuse nebula having no well defined boundaries' (Sak 2021: 388) and proposes her own catch-all term demonstrating this struggle which she calls the 'Fuzzy Conception of Giftedness.' However, such a term could prove unhelpful in pinpointing exactly who the STAR cohort are, and I am inclined to agree with Shepherd (2021) that any use of the term 'gifted' can have elitist connotations and could be a distraction for researching my object of study.

In England and Wales, the context is different with the term 'gifted and talented' being used from 1997 following the Excellence in Cities Policy with Smithers and Robinson advising ditching this term for 'highly able' in their 2012 report following the closing of this policy initiative (a thorough overview of English and Welsh policy is given later on in this chapter). Indeed Freeman (1998) stated her concern for the 'gifted and talented' term more than a decade earlier suggesting that it resembles something 'bestowed from on high' with Bailey, Tan and Morley (2004) highlighting

the conceptual difficulties of what 'gifted and talented' actually means. Moreover, Dimitriadis and Georgeson (2018) go further suggesting that the replacement of terms such as 'gifted and talented' with 'able' and 'most able' is partly due to a distancing from what they perceive as an unsuccessful and abandoned 'Gifted and Talented' initiative. Yet Lowe (2018) highlights that even on the ground in schools and colleges across England and Wales, there is still considerable varied terminology in use such as 'more able and talented', 'high achieving', and less frequently, 'high learning potential', 'high academic potential', 'high and advanced performers' or 'most able and exceptional', and still some use of 'gifted and talented'. This therefore suggests that there is a somewhat diverse terminology for understanding and defining high achieving students (a 'vast distraction' that occupies too much of academics' time according to Stephen and Warwick (2016: 4)), and (as will be developed later on in this chapter) this is not helped by a lack of governmental identification criteria.

Therefore, defining who exactly the STAR cohort are and clarifying the most appropriate terms and reference points for the scope of this study is of high importance in terms of authenticity, reliability and validity (Bush 2012) and to fully grasp the object of study. Moreover, the intention of this study is to contribute to the debate on high achievement provision and elite university application, therefore it is imperative that I am clear on the parameters of how this study identifies and considers high achieving sixth form students and the literature and academic study surrounding them.

Thus, whilst this study seeks to adopt a clear and value free definition of the cohort that is studied by using Northwest Sixth Form College's entry criteria to the STAR programme and not a different definition, it is clear that there are complexities in the field of defining such students in this way. As has already been articulated, I am aware that only using a definition based on prior achievement could exclude certain social groups and potentially high achieving students who have not had the support or capacity to demonstrate their capabilities. However, I do feel that using the STAR cohort entry criteria of seven 7s at GCSE does delineate the object of study clearly and is useful for defining my sample frame as will be shown in chapter four. The

following sections of this chapter therefore seek to locate the STAR cohort and their characteristics within the wider academic literature. Studies of student high achievement are often situated within defined terms such as 'gifted' or 'more able' and in wanting to understand the authentic student experience of being a high achiever, the following sections will scope the academic terrain in which the STAR students sit through an analysis of the wider 'gifted' and 'most able' literature, and where appropriate, drawing parallels with my own object of study.

What is meant by Giftedness?

From a societal and institutional level, the concept of defining and classifying high achieving students has almost always been driven by government policy with the historical record exhibiting an abundance of strategies to sift and sort students into ability through means such as setting and streaming (Sukhnandan and Lee 1998) or different schooling altogether (the English and Welsh tri-partite system of 1944 was an excellent example of this (Bates, Lewis and Pickard 2011: 33)). Dubois (1970) notes that as early as 2200b.c. the Chinese developed a system for selecting the most eligible people for government positions through a range of competitive examinations and in Ancient Greece, Plato proposed a programme of mastery for 'golden' children to facilitate a new generation of leaders (Freeman 1979). But in each case, education was only the preserve of the privileged upper class minority (Tannenbaum 2000).

In a bid to recognise the different understandings and the development of academic thought and practice concerning high achievement, Lo and Porath (2017) identify three paradigm shifts in their meta-theoretical account of 'gifted' (the term they use) education approaches (summarised in Table 2) and provide a useful overview of the history and fragmentation within the field. They view each paradigm using Capra's (1997: 6) definition as 'a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organises itself.' Indeed, such paradigms can inform the ideas surrounding my research in being able to locate the STAR cohort

within the literature and associated paradigms. In this way we can have some sense of the lens through which the study of 'gifted' students has been viewed and will now look at each paradigm in turn to consider the relevance to my own object of study.

Table 2: Paradigm Shifts in Gifted Education (PSF-GT) adapted from Lo and Porath (2017)

	Action-oriented ideology	Epistemological framework	Conceptual undertaking	Preferred terminology
Early context	Demystification	Positivism	Heredity	Genius Prodigious
Modern onset	Identification	Postpositivism	Measurability	Gifted
Current shifts	Transaction	Systemism	Conditionality	Advanced More able

The early context paradigm of demystification

In the early context, Lo and Parath (2017) draw on some of the earliest records of 'giftedness' - such as the example that has already been mentioned in ancient China – and the growing attempts to explain the phenomena such as Comte's (1789-1857) law of three stages (Martineau 2000) or Galton's (1822-1911) systematic anthropometric work concluding that 'giftedness' was inherited (Galton 1869). Lo and Parath (2017: 345) note that such work is considered very distasteful today due to its racist and eugenicist overtones, however this paradigm highlights the drive to quantify individual differences and attributes. This is best epitomised in the measurements in terms of 'intelligence' by the French psychologist Binet in the 1900s who responded to the government's plea to identify which children would need more help at school, following a law requiring all children to attend school (Binet 1905). This became the first 'Intelligence Quotient' or IQ test and was further developed in the next paradigm shift by Terman (1925) and Wechsler (1945, 1974) to become the well-recognised IQ score of today (MENSA 2023). For Lo and Parath (2017) the early context paradigm of demystifying 'giftedness' was just the beginning of the idea of unpacking human intelligence and considering individual

difference. In the context of the STAR cohort, the delineation of who is part of the cohort is certainly more sophisticated than crude anthropometrics, however, it is important to understand the historical situatedness of conceptions of intelligence and the divisiveness that this can engender. Indeed, such notions of difference will be developed later on in this chapter. The modern outset, by contrast, would yield more complex approaches to 'giftedness' and its applicability to education and pedagogy.

The modern context paradigm of identification

In the second paradigm shift, Lo and Parath (2017) see the modern onset as being constructed around an ideology of identification that subsequently results in pinpointed and adapted pedagogy for the 'gifted'. This saw the movement from a simple IQ test as advocated by Terman (1925) or Hollingworth (1926) to a complex series of identification that featured general learning abilities (such as creativity) and specific talents (e.g. in writing or the arts) (Renzulli 2011; Sternberg and Davidson 2005). Indeed Gardner's (2006) seminal work on multiple intelligences showcases the transition from seeing intelligence as linear to being multi-dimensional, highlighting nine ways that this can be measured and identified. This set the trend for contemporary views of intelligence as being dynamic and socially constructed (Borland, 1997, 2013; Callahan and Hertberg-Davis, 2013, Lo, 2014). For Lo and Parath (2017: 348) this complex construction of iterations of 'giftedness' reflected 'an ongoing dialectical understanding of a complex social construct' and highlighted how the field was making sense of what 'gifted' education was and its possibilities (Borland, 2005; Cramond, 2004). In seeing 'giftedness' as 'dynamic, contextual, and emergent' (Dai, 2010: 21), Lo and Parath note the shifts in identification from 'being to becoming' with 'giftedness' moving from being stable and unchanging to being developmental and addressing the issue of potentiality. The reality of this is viewing 'giftedness' as more than an IQ cutoff (Borland, 1997; McGlonn-Nelson, 2005) with the role of educators moving from a passive search for 'giftedness and talents' to empowering 'gifted' students in the name of social justice

(Lo and Parath 2017: 350). In the context of the STAR students, this paradigm aligns with the social policy context (as outlined further below) within which these students have forged their educational careers with students having been part of 'gifted and talented' programmes in their high schools. In addition, this paradigm also acknowledges the social factors that can limit or inhibit high achievement and therefore has distinct parallels with how the STAR programme was set up and its intended purpose.

Current shifts: The transaction paradigm

Although acknowledging that it is still in its embryonic stage, for Lo and Parath (2017), the final paradigm highlights a growing dissatisfaction with a reductionist belief in identification that a person is either 'gifted' or not (Borland, 2005, 2009) and a movement towards inclusive education that matches educational abilities with the appropriate educational experiences (VanTassel-Baska and Wood 2010). This abandonment of the 'gifted/not gifted' dichotomy that perhaps could be seen as elitist and promoting social inequality (Eyre 2011) sees 'giftedness' as a social construction that reflects social and cultural values in a particular time and context (Hymer 2013). For Barab and Plucker (2002: 174) 'giftedness and talents' are emphasised as being 'the dynamic transactions among the individual, the physical environment, and the sociocultural context'. For education, this means creating appropriate contexts and opportunities to maximise student effectiveness and ultimately into 'giftedness'. Thus the 'transaction' occurs between the student and their environment by not seeing 'giftedness' as static and waiting to be discovered but rather through the creation of the appropriate environment so that the actualisation of 'giftedness' is a possibility. In light of this, it is possible to understand calls to move away from the gifted label for individuals to it only being attached to particular programmes or initiatives (Matthews and Dai, 2014; Olszewski-Kubilius and Calvert, 2016). For example, with the STAR programme, there is a particular strand that has specific opportunities and events relating to students who have a significant disposition towards Science, Technology,

Engineering and Maths (STEM) and this perhaps could be seen as creating appropriate conditions for high achievement to flourish.

In moving through the three paradigms from 'giftedness' as manifested wonders, to 'giftedness' as measurable predictions, to effectuation of human possibilities, Lo and Parath (2017) argue that there is still considerable focus on the identification paradigm but also highlight how each paradigm can be overlapping as the study of 'gifted' education moves forward. Of particular note, is the relevance this has towards my own study and where the identification practices of the STAR students fits in within the paradigms.

As stated in Chapter 1, the STAR students within Northwest Sixth Form College are defined through their prior attainment at GCSE (with an entry criteria of seven 7s). Although, (as previously stated) this does not take into account social factors contributing to such grades, using prior attainment does provide a clear delineation and ease in defining my object of study. In this sense, the system used within the college is most aligned with the Modern paradigm in that there is a clear sense of identification with the college seeking to address who the high achieving students are but also trying to counter issues of social justice, such as providing a budget to promote more entries to medicine and Oxbridge and hence looking at student potential as well as where they actually may currently be in terms of academic achievement. There are also elements of the transaction paradigm in that appropriate contexts and opportunities are given to the STAR cohort in order to maximise achievement – this could be in the form of Oxbridge taster sessions or subject specific university visits. Therefore, the work of Lo and Parath is pertinent to this study as it succinctly gives some context in to how the STAR programme identifies high achieving students and how this fits in with current academic thought of such programmes (this will be discussed further underneath in terms of government policy).

Having therefore discussed the development and evolution of the study of 'gifted' students through different paradigms and how the STAR students can be located within this, I will now go on to look at the social policy context within England.

Education Policy in England for high achievement

With the object of study being based in England, it is important to establish the policy context and initiatives that have taken place in terms of identification and provision for high achieving students. Indeed, in a marked difference to American and European definitions, policy in this particular area has undergone discernible linguistic changes from identification of the 'gifted' to 'gifted and talented' through to 'most able' or 'highly able'. This section will therefore outline a brief history of policies and initiatives in order to give context and situatedness to the STAR cohort.

Policy relating to the high achievement in England has its roots in the tri-partite system enshrined in the 1944 Education Act when the creation of Grammar Schools firmly cemented the identification paradigm of using IQ Tests to ascertain who the most gifted students were (Reid and Boettger 2015). For a while, such tests became in vogue, with certain Local Educational Authorities using them to screen for low and high ability students (Montgomery 1996: 29-30) and the introduction and expansion of Grammar Schools in the 1950s and 60s preserved the 'measurement' of intelligence through tests in English and Arithmetic (the 11 Plus) firmly into the British education system. This led to on average, the 'top' twenty percent of children 'passing' and progressing through to the Grammar Schools with secondary modern schools taking the rest of the 'failures' (Gillard 2018), in turn having a major impact on self-esteem and student identity. Indeed, in the words of Wrigley (2014: 9), 'the majority had to accept this judgement of mental inferiority'. Yet despite reservations at the time that this created class divisions (Floud, Halsey and Marten 1956), for some working class children who did attend grammar schools, this offered an opportunity for social mobility (Harris and Rose 2013). Notwithstanding, there were inconsistencies in what the tests were actually measuring and whether this truly reflected intelligence (Passow 1990), however, faith in the IQ test (in terms of policy and testing) persisted (Ball 2017: 77). Some Grammar schools still survive despite Local Authorities being encouraged to replace them with Comprehensive schools from 1965 (Casey and Koshy 2013, Dean 1998, Department for Education and Science Circular 10/65) and a formal outlawing between 1976 and 1979, until

this was overturned by a new Conservative government (Gillard 2018). From a peak of 1298 Grammar schools in 1964, 163 remain, with 11 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) (out of 151 LEAs) accounting for 60% of all grammar schools (Danechi 2020:6). Most Grammar schools are now Academies and/or single sex and have their own sixth form (Gorrard and Siddiqui 2018: 910). Typically, they remain over-subscribed and popular with parents whose children gain a place.

With a change to a Labour Government in 1997, from the late 1990's there was over a decade long focus on the education of the 'gifted and talented' with a raft of policies, strategies and funding aimed at improving provision and outcomes for gifted children (See Table 3 for an overview of policy). Perhaps most significant was the flagship Excellence in Cities programme that brought the term 'Gifted and Talented' into common use, putting a greater emphasis than ever before on schools, sixth forms and local authorities doing more for all, including their high achieving students (Blair 1999). This policy compelled schools to identify 5% to 10% of their pupils as 'gifted and talented' and place them on a register, appoint a coordinator to be responsible and to implement a distinct teaching and learning programme for gifted and talented pupils (Koshy, Smith and Casey 2018: 77). This also crystallised the right and entitlement that university should be firmly in the sights of every young person particularly in disadvantaged areas (Kendall, O'Donnell, Golden, Ridley, Machin, Rutt, Noden 2005). The extra provision, both inside and outside of the classroom, specifically aimed at the gifted and talented would have some success with comprehensive schools having an impact on high achieving students, creating what would be a lasting and sustained focus (Machin, McNally and Meghri 2007:20) – a domain that previously would be associated with the Grammar Schools. This can be witnessed in the subsequent policies such as the National Register for Gifted and Talented (Smithers and Robinson 2012) and 'most able' becoming a key performance indicator for Ofsted (Ofsted 2013). Secondly, the ramifications this had for universities and the widening participation agenda would further the cause for the relationship between high achievement and attendance at Russell Group universities. Indeed, the Excellence in Cities Policy prompted a response from universities that saw Summer Schools begin for the first time for the

'most able' (Blair 1999) and have now become a firm fixture of the university

Widening Participation agenda (Hoare and Mann 2012).

Table 3: Recent 'Gifted and Talented' Policy adapted from Smithers and Robinson (2012)

Date	Policy
Mar 1999	Excellence in Cities programme launched, including Gifted and Talented strand.
Sept 2001	White Paper, Schools Achieving Success, announces Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth.
2002	National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth set up at the University of Warwick, funded for five years.
From 2006	Schools required to record percentage of gifted and talented children on the annual January census returns.
Mar 2007	A new National Programme for Gifted and Talented Education (later rebranded as the Young, Gifted and Talented) launched.
May 2007	Funding over four years for nine Excellence Hubs formed by universities, schools and others to run summer schools and offer other provision.
Aug 2007	Contract with University of Warwick for National Academy ends.
Sept 2007	Young Gifted and Talented Learner Academy for 4–19-year-olds set up.
Nov 2007	National Champion for the Young Gifted and Talented Programme announced.
2008	Gifted and Talented becomes priority option for High Performing Specialist Schools, intended to be lead schools in a national secondary G&T network.
July 2008	Gifted and Talented strand of City Challenge announced with funding for three years to raise the attainment and aspirations of Year 10 pupils eligible for free school meals in London, the Black Country and Manchester.
Feb 2009	National Register of Gifted and Talented launched, but discontinued in February 2010.
July 2009	Government announces a move away from the centralized Young Gifted and Talented programme to more locally based activities; gifted pupils aged 14–19 from deprived backgrounds to be offered scholarships.
Jan 2010	The then Labour Government planned to offer pupils and parents guarantees, with every school required to confirm these to its gifted and talented pupils

Mar 2010	Contract for Young, Gifted & Talented Learner Academy programme ends. National Strategies expands its G&T provision.
Mar 2011	Funding for National Strategies ends. G&T materials transferred to an online National Archive; see http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110812195502/http://nsonline.org.uk/node/288007). Funding for G & T, including High Performing Specialist Schools, re-routed through Dedicated Schools Grant revenue stream for schools.

However, despite sustained interest and costly initiatives, implementation into the classroom proved at times, difficult, from issues with the concept (Bailey, Tan and Morley 2004), getting teachers to move from considering the less able to the more able (Brady and Koshy 2014) to identification and training issues (Dimitriadis 2012). Indeed, putting all the onus on schools to select students relative to their own individual school cohorts by using a norm referencing approach (Lok, McNaught and Young 2016) was rather problematic (Brady and Koshy 2014), reflecting an arbitrary top-slice of potentially Gifted and Talented Students being identified by individual schools that was too diffuse, rather than identifying potential students through criterion referencing or other means (Koshy, Smith and Casey 2018).

From 2010, the national Young, Gifted and Talented programme was wound down and a change of direction occurred under the new Coalition Government, with the Gifted and Talented legacy described as a 'hotch-potch of abandoned initiatives and unclear priorities' (Smithers and Robinson 2012: i). The responsibility therein for provision for the 'most able' was placed upon schools and colleges to continue this focus (highlighted in two evaluative reports by Ofsted in 2013 and 2015) and putting pressure on educational institutions to improve their curricula. At the time of writing (2023), there was no national definition of the 'most able' students from the Department for Education, with the DfE stating that it is through accountability measures (such as Progress 8 or value-added measures) and other steps taken (such as the introduction of the grade 9 at GCSE) that ensures that schools and colleges maintain a provision and are held to account for the 'most able' (DfE 2023). Therefore, identification and measurement of 'most able' students and their progress is conducting using national attainment data and 'mapping' projected

targets based on what a student has achieved at each Key Stage (DfE 2022). In this way, although not an agreed definition, there is some commonality over what 'most able' students achieve be it a score of 110 and above at Key Stage 2 (Loft and Danechi 2020) or A*-B at A-Level (Crawford et al 2014). Ultimately, discussions relating to the 'most able' see the delineation between 'able' or 'most able' as one of achievement as the most significant marker (Francis et al 2012). This is significant for my study as prior achievement is the key indicator for entry criteria on to the STAR programme and how I am defining 'high achievers' as my object of study. In this respect, there is considerable overlap with how the DfE defines the 'most able' and the STAR cohort. Moreover, this overview of Education policy in England gives context to why the STAR programme was set up in light of responsibility for provision resting with competing individual colleges and schools.

In a House of Commons Briefing Paper, Loft and Danechi (2020: 6) highlighted the position of high achievement provision in England using attainment data. Using newly reformed Key Stage 2 Standards, they estimated that in 2019, approximately 11% of all pupils in England or 68,000 were achieving the higher standard and could be could potentially be considered as 'more able'. Most notably they found that girls were more likely to achieve the higher standard than boys, and students known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM) were less likely than pupils that were not eligible, to achieve the higher standard (4% compared to 12% respectively). Similarly, we can build up a picture of the influence of social disadvantage and deprivation from the work of the Sutton Trust who underlined the gap for high achieving disadvantaged students:

> '…while 72% of non-disadvantaged high attainers achieve 5 A*- A grades [old tariff GCSEs equivalent to grades 9-7] or more at GCSE, only 52% of disadvantaged high attainers do. If high attaining disadvantaged students performed as well as high attaining students overall, an additional 1,000 disadvantaged students would achieve at least 5 A*-A at GCSE each year.' (Montacute 2018: 3)

This was of particular relevance for my study as it informed my research to investigate how high achieving student experiences differ according to factors such as family background or household income and was a pertinent area of exploration within the research. Northwest Sixth Form College has a higher proportion of students than the national average of students who are the first in their family to apply to university and so this was of interest to explore this experience from a student perspective.

Whilst there is still some focus on the 'most able' in education in England and Wales (Ofsted 2013, 2015; Montacute 2018), a report by Potential Plus UK analysing Ofsted reports published in June 2018 and June 2019 and the provision for the 'most able' pupils concluded that it was still a work in progress, in particular highlighting that in over 44% of cases, academic provision for the 'most able' was insufficient (Howell and Ramsden 2020: 2). This underscores the notion, that despite a sustained period of policy, the education of the 'most able' and high achievers is still an issue particularly in relation to inequality. This has therefore shaped my research and was a factor I wanted to explore from a student perspective in my own research.

Having therefore outlined the policy context in which I conducted my research with the STAR cohort of Northwest Sixth Form College, I will now outline previous literature associated with student experience and high achievement.

The student experience of being high achieving

Having scoped existing literature and policy surrounding high achievement and where my object of study, the STAR cohort, fits into this, this section aims to understand previous research from a student perspective of what it is like to be a 'high achiever' and understand particular factors that constitute the student experience in order to situate my first research question. Whilst there are many studies on how teachers perceive high achieving students (Croft 2003; Wilson 2006), how schools prepare for such students (Coleman 2011; Coleman and Cross 2000) and other supporting mechanisms for coping with teaching high achievers

(Pilarinos and Solomon 2017; Friedman and Mann 1993; Frydenberg and Lewis 1991), the research literature from a student perspective regarding student experience often clusters around notions of difference and identity formation. In focusing attention on to the first research question, this will now be explored in turn.

The experience of being different

In a review of 25 years of previous literature, Coleman et al (2015: 360-362) regard the 'essence' of being 'gifted' as 'being different', both in terms of ability and in what they describe as 'living passionately.' This difference can be felt in the reaction of peers to themselves as well as a feeling within themselves. For example, Hebert and Mcbee (2007) highlight how a student who was passionate about astronomy felt increasingly isolated as no one else was interested. Equally Cross, Stewart and Coleman (2003) highlight the mismatch between 'gifted' students and their environment because of a difference in academic ability. Yet this difference is often channeled into an intense passion. Coleman and Guo (2013) interviewed eight children who demonstrated such intensity for learning for more than a year in areas such as mathematics and spelling. They argued that whereas parents found this passion a little concerning and thought they were spending too much of their leisure time on their chosen field, the children felt that it was just a natural part of themselves. As one child remarked, 'It's just something that I have to do. Not that I'm forced to do, but it's just something in me that I need this' (Coleman and Guo 2013: 167). Indeed, such tendencies are exhibited within the STAR cohort at Northwest Sixth Form College where students may have an intense passion for certain subjects and my research sought to explore how they saw themselves and how others perceived them during day-to-day life at the Sixth Form college. Moreover, how potential passion or intensity was formed or perhaps driven by other key actors within the sub-field such as teachers or parents or even myself as STAR cohort manger would prove to be a fruitful area of research to explore.

A key demarcation at Northwest Sixth Form College was the delineation between students who are on the mainstream pastoral programme and the students who are part of the STAR programme. As detailed in chapter 1, whilst they share academic lessons, the programme of support, access to opportunities and the weekly pastoral tutorial was different for STAR students and this notion of difference and how STAR students saw themselves and how others see them was an important part of understanding authentic student experience in my research. Henfield, Moore, and Wood (2008) note that when 'gifted' students are aware of the difference between themselves and others then they often wanted to be treated as 'normal' in their social interactions. As Coleman et al (2015) argue, it is this act of being treated normally that promotes acceptability into a group. In this respect Coie (1990), in a study of peer rejection, underlines the notion that ultimately children do not appreciate being different and therefore make choices which can minimise this. For example, Gaither (2008) in a case study of gifted children illustrated how one child reflected that they were introverted when they were young as they didn't want other classmates to recognise just how different they were to them. This experience of difference therefore raises a fundamental issue in what it is like to be 'gifted'/'most able'/STAR student or crucially, what it is like to be treated in terms of expectations placed upon you?

Indeed, being identified or treated as high achieving confers certain expectations from teachers, parents, siblings, peers and from the high achieving student themselves and can be both positive and negative. Moulton, Moulton, Housewright, and Bailey (1998) conducted a study of 14 students' perceptions of being labelled 'gifted and talented' and detailed that at its worst, the experience was all about the negative stereotyping and pressure from parents and teachers but at its best, having this label meant internal gratification and advanced learning. This notion of being labelled as high achieving as being a mixed blessing is a recurrent theme within the academic literature (Hickey and Toth 1990; Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth 1988), although more recent studies such as Berlin (2009: 221) highlight how with better teacher training and development, negative stereotyping can be minimised with 'most able' students describing the benefits of specialist programmes as it allowed

them to make friends with like-minded individuals. Indeed, in terms of support, Shore, Chichekian, Gyles and Walker (2018) reviewed previous academic literature on the relationship between 'gifted' students and friendships, finding that it was not the case that these students had fewer friendships and liked to work alone, rather that they had different values in friendship and in particular enjoyed an emphasis on competition for fun. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence that high achieving students can be expected to be just as happy as other children instead of being isolated or alone (Neihart, Pfeiffer and Cross 2016: 284). This chimes in with the distinct programme that is in place for the STAR cohort and the key relationships formed with fellow STAR students – my research examined the centrality of friendships in their experience of being high achieving and how programmes such as the STAR programme, that physically places high achieving students together for their weekly tutorial programme, helps or hinders their college experience and sense of self.

Forming identity as a learner

The second element of the experience of high achieving students was the notion of how their experience influences their own identity – often this is in response to the perception that they might be 'different' and so there are many overlaps with the studies outlined above. Primarily, there is a body of literature that views the social-emotional development of a student as a period of both promotion of resiliency but also vulnerability (Neihart, 1999; Perham 2013). For Haberlin (2018: 272) the key to this is 'adjustment' which he defines as 'an individual's patterns or processes for responding to the environment's demands'. In his small scale case study of gifted students, he documented how two students successfully adapted to potentially challenging situations (such as academic and social pressures) and adjusted so that the environment better served them. Crucial to this was the notion that this positive adjustment could not have happened without strong family support so that the students could 'feel a sense of belonging while retaining his or her own personal identity' (Haberlin 2018: 279). This theme of family support and networks in

relation to high achievement was explored in the research gathering phase of my research with the STAR cohort with UK literature on this reinforcing the notion that 'most able' students who have more supportive families have 'higher productivity, motivation and conscientiousness, and lower levels of anxiety' (Freeman, 2018: 171).

Continuing the social-emotional development relating to how identity is formed, Szymanski, Croft and Godor (2018) suggest that there are two competing stereotypes of the 'gifted' comprising of: harmony theory (where 'gifted' students are well adjusted and successful in life) versus disharmony theory (high intellect comes with the cost of social and psychological issues). Using the PISA test scores of 2012 they conducted one of the largest studies of 'gifted' students using a data set from 13 EU countries concluding that 'the vast majority of academically 'gifted' students reported equal or higher level of belonging' (such as making friends easily or not feeling awkward) (Szymanski et al 2018: 194). Crucial to this was the institutional factors needed in creating the right environment for 'gifted' students to flourish so that students could tangibly recognise factors such as a higher level of challenge within lessons, academic acceptance and a motivating environment (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, Rogers, and McCormick 2010). This notion of environment and how students find a sense of belonging was explored in my own research to not only see if the phenomena existed but also if intended strategies to promote such feelings by Northwest Sixth Form College are having an effect.

A final factor in identity construction was how high achieving students manipulate their identity when faced with situations where they feel a need to 'fit in'. Although, researched some years ago Cross, Coleman, and Terhaar-Yonkers, (1991) interviewed 'gifted' children and discovered that three levels of strategies were used by them to change how apparent their ability might be. These were: 'Invisible strategies' such as not saying a test was easy; 'high-visibility strategies' like being the class clown; or 'dis-identifying strategies' such as feigned interest in small talk. (Cross et al 1991: 52-54) What is interesting here is the strategies that were employed to negotiate and overcome what some 'gifted' students described as a 'social handicap' (Coleman and Cross, 2014:3). Indeed, this notion of keeping

academic ability 'under the radar' is similarly explored by Peterson and Ray (2006) and what is extremely pertinent is the amount of effort that can go in to maintaining and performing certain identities and the balance between high achievement and popularity (Francis, Skelton and Read 2010). Of particular relevance is the extent and prevalence of these experiences and strategies within the STAR cohort – certainly as a classroom practitioner I have often heard STAR students modify their experience of an exam in terms of difficulty when talking with a peer ('it was really hard'), only to then state to myself (as a teacher) that they had found the test easy, and this was explored within my own research gathering phase with the STAR cohort.

Therefore, in concluding this section, it is evident from the literature regarding the experience of high achieving students that it can be one of feeling different but how positive or negative this can be is influenced by factors such as the family, friendships and structural organisation of their educational programme. In addition, it is also a fundamental time for identity formation, with a range of strategies employed to navigate this in how high achieving students experience their schooling and their future. These factors constituting student experience are investigated in my own research on the STAR cohort to answer my first research question. In addition, I am also explicitly interested in high achieving student's perception and application to Higher Education and so this will now be explored before looking specifically at the literature surrounding applications to Oxbridge.

The context of applying to Higher Education

When students finish compulsory education or training in England aged 18 (DfES 2007), the options presented to students through the pastoral system within schools and colleges (Schofield 2007) are typically one of either university, apprenticeship or employment (although other choices are made such as taking a Gap year or seeking employment). Most recent statistics for the UK indicate that just over 560,000 school leaving students were accepted for a place to study at university (UCAS 2021) and around 75,000 students began an apprenticeship in

2019/20 from leaving school/college (Foley 2021). At Northwest Sixth Form College, from just under 1000 leavers at the end of the 2020-21 academic year, 69% progressed to Higher Education, 13% went into employment and 6% went on to an apprenticeship. For the STAR cohort, out of 152 STAR leavers, 131 (86%) progressed to university with 82 (54%) gaining a place at a Russell Group University (more research-intensive universities). Of the remaining students, 5% gained an apprenticeship, 3% entered employment and 6% took a Gap year. Indeed, applying to university is still often considered by some to be the 'gold standard' (Kirby 2015: 1) and with the vast majority of the STAR cohort looking at applying to university, it was important to consider these perceptions and their experiences in my research.

When considering the choices laid before an 18-year-old student preparing to leave school or college, Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) perceptively argue that it is a complex piece of problem solving that is intertwined and influenced by many different social factors. Whilst they found that there was a very strong link between being middle class and applying to university, high GCSE grades were the 'main predictor' in applying to university particularly for high status courses such as medicine (Ball et al 2002: 54). Whilst applying to university for the STAR cohort will be more than likely for most individuals, whether that is to an elite university such as Oxford or Cambridge or a university closer to home is a different matter with Whitehead, Raffan and Deaney (2006) finding it to be a delicate balance of weighing up the pros and cons exacerbated by other issues such as finance (Baker 2020), the aspirations of parents (Lareau and Weininger 2003), cultural issues (Shiner and Noden 2015) and geographical location (Drewes and Michael 2006).

Moreover, and of importance for my study, was the influence that ethnic background can have on university choice. Ball, Reay and David (2002) highlighted how minority ethnic students made such decisions finding two ideal types of 'contingent choosers' (students who had minimal family support in such decisions) and 'embedded choosers' (students who had families who were active participants in the decision). Of particular note was the characteristics surrounding the contingent choosers such as often looking to stay at home for university and having a 'weak' imagined future (Ball, Reay and David 2002: 337). Furthermore, was the

influence of parents within minority ethnic households with Reay, David and Ball (2005: 76-77) documenting how some parents became too involved to the point of impinging on the students' independence and freedom of choice. As will be shown with the STAR participants, for some of the students who identified as coming from a minority ethnic background, this was a significant feature of their experience at home.

In an effort to address under-representation from various social groups (such as certain minority ethnic groups, first generation applicants or people from low-income households) in applying to universities, the UK government put forward various initiatives and polices under the flagship banner of 'Widening Participation' (DfES 2003). Kickstarted by The Dearing Report (1997), initiatives such as Summer Schools, Access programmes, taster sessions and student experiences have become a staple part of a sixth form students' experience of preparing to apply to university (Burke 2012; Connell-Smith and Hubble 2018;) with programmes such as (the now defunct) Aimhigher (Passey, Morris and Waldman 2009; Emmerson, Frayne, McNally and Silva 2006), Uni Connect (Bowes 2023) and organisations such as The Sutton Trust (Hoare and Mann 2012) becoming synonymous with Widening Participation. Such initiatives normally take place during the first year of sixth form study (although some initiatives can start as early as year 7) and this is a key part of the STAR programme, with tutorial sessions dedicated to helping students apply for such initiatives. Of particular note for the research was that because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all Widening Participation schemes went online (TASO 2022) and so I wanted to look at the effects of this and whether this altered the student experience, particularly in applying to Oxbridge.

Therefore, having given a very brief overview of the context of applying to university, the literature surrounding my two research questions of the student experience of applying to Oxford and Cambridge and decision making processes will now be considered.

The Oxbridge application process

As has been already indicated in Chapter 1, not only am I interested in the authentic student experience of being high achieving, but more specifically I have a particular curiosity surrounding the STAR student experience in applying for Oxford or Cambridge universities. Indeed, the process of applying to these universities can be a long and drawn out affair that predominantly takes place in the final year of sixth form but with significant preparation taking place in the first year of Sixth Form. This section will begin by clarifying the use of the Oxbridge term before outlining the application procedures and then discussing the academic literature surrounding student experience of this process.

As has been highlighted in terms of locating the STAR cohort within the 'gifted' and 'most able' literature, the other key aspect of my research is in relation to Oxbridge and therefore it is important to clarify how this portmanteau of Oxford and Cambridge will be used in my research. In particular, due to ethical reasons of anonymity, I will be using Oxbridge to mean either Oxford or Cambridge or a particular college of the universities of Oxford or Cambridge. In doing so, I hope to not draw any attention to one particular institution or single them out so that they are identifiable. In addition, I feel this is necessary to protect the participants within my research as without this level of protection, they could be identified within the research (more will be discussed on this in Chapter 4).

The application process for Oxbridge begins in the final year of sixth form when the students are usually aged 17 or 18 years old. Table 4 outlines the typical process that a sixth form student will go through in making an application to university with significant differences for an Oxbridge application being an early deadline, extra external entrance exam and an interview (sometimes more than one). In addition, a student can only apply for either Oxford or Cambridge alongside 4 other university choices.

Table 4: Activities and deadlines in the final year of school for students wishing to apply for higher education (adapted from Mountford-Zimdars 2016: 106)

Final year of Sixth Form	Oxbridge	Other universities in the UK
September and earlier	Listen to talks by universities about what they offer, attend university fairs, attend open days or visit potential institutions in person or through a virtual campus tour, use internet to research universities.	
	Register for subject-specific additional tests	
	Application systems through UCAS opens	
October	15th October application deadline through UCAS	Deadline for equal consideration for only medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences
Late October/early November	Test date for most subject tests for admission to Oxford and Cambridge Receive invitation for interview or information that not invited for interview	Interview invitations might start arriving for subjects requiring it
December	Interviews for UK/EU students (either in person or online)	
January	Receipt of admissions decisions, usually an 'unsuccessful' or a 'conditional offer'	25th of January is the standard application deadline for equal consideration for the majority of remaining courses and universities
March/April	Study very hard for the final examinations at school as the results in these examinations determine university destination	
May	Applicants to have received all of their decisions on offers: 18th of May	
May/June	Sit A-level (or equivalent) examinations	

June	Standard reply date of 8th June for applicants to confirm what is their first choice and insurance choice university
August	A-level results day Either confirm offer with the first-choice university or, if the grades are no quite as high as hoped, confirm with the 'safety school' or, if unsuccessful, consider 'clearing' process through UCAS
September/October	Academic work starts (unless deferred entry)

Within the STAR cohort (2nd years), my role as STAR manager was to support the students through this process, offering help on issues such as personal statements and giving guidance and skills support through the extra examinations and providing mock interviews. Primarily this work in support and guidance for university was frontloaded into the first term between September and December with the remainder of the academic year focused on supporting students to achieve high grades. In addition, through the weekly tutorials and wider opportunities that are offered in the first year of the STAR programme, initial contact and knowledge of both the institutions and the Oxbridge application process is made through activities such as taster sessions, masterclasses and open days (more will be explored on my role in the process during a discussion of insider research in chapter 4). But why the focus on Oxbridge and why is it considered important?

Much is made through the creation and promotion of the elite status that an Oxbridge degree bestows (Kamens, 1977; Meyer, 1977; Collins, 1979). In 2018, The Sutton Trust compiled a report that partly illustrated how this elite status is conferred (Montacute and Cullinane 2018:12):

> 'The two institutions are the most competitive to gain access to in the UK; regularly appear in first and second position in league tables and are often at or near the top of worldwide rankings. Additionally, graduates from Oxbridge dominate public life in the UK. Almost half of the current cabinet were educated at Oxbridge (compared to 35% educated at one of the 22 other Russell Group universities) as were 24% of the MPs elected in 2017 (compared to 30% at other Russell Group institutions). Across several other leading professions, Oxbridge also dominates; 78% of top barristers, 54% of

prominent journalists and 51% of senior civil servants were educated at one of the two universities.'

An Oxbridge degree clearly opens many doors not least for its academic prowess but also the connections and cache it possesses - 'a valuable prize' one Oxbridge selector described it as (Mountford-Zimdars 2016: 201) – but this is also tempered by opinions that Oxbridge promotes a negative exclusivity, emblematic of a corrupt and 'toxic' system that benefits the privately educated (Rusbridger 2018:3). This is perhaps why the application process and the decision-making leading up to an Oxbridge application is a dominant theme amongst the academic literature, particularly in relation to social class.

The decision to actually apply to Oxbridge and university often takes place in the preceding year (the first year of Sixth Form) although for some students it is even earlier than that. Reay, David and Ball (2005) researched how a student's current school/college and their family background shaped their higher education choices finding that such choices were often constrained but some people's more than others. In particular they found that students from working class backgrounds did not identify with what they perceived were the characteristics needed to apply for Oxbridge and felt better placed to apply for a more local, less prestigious university where they felt like they would fit in. In utilising the work of Bourdieu, Reay et al (2005:92) found it to be, 'a process of class-matching … between student and university; a synchronisation of familial and institutional habitus'. In this way, they argued that students were more likely to make the decision to apply to a university in which they would feel more comfortable and reflected their own characteristics so that it felt like they were in a familiar environment and was a logical next step. This was an example of Bourdieu's conception of social practice: '…when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127) (More will be explored on Bourdieu in the following chapter). Indeed, several studies have utilised Bourdieu particularly in terms of cultural, social and economic capital to highlight how they are mobilised for middle-class students to have greater success in applying to elite universities

(Bathmaker 2016; Perez-Adamson and Mercer 2016; Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath 2009). This notion of feeling comfortable within a particular environment and the links to different forms of capital is explored within my research and forms a key part in trying to understand the lived experience of the STAR students going through the Oxbridge application process.

Underpinning ideas around capital is the notion of social class which looms large when considering how many students are accepted into Oxbridge each year. A report by The Sutton Trust highlighted the potential inequity in the process with eight top schools having as many Oxbridge acceptances as another 2894 schools and colleges put together. In addition 21% of higher education applications from independent schools are for Oxford or Cambridge, compared to 5% at comprehensive schools and 4% at sixth form colleges whilst Independent school pupils are 7 times more likely to gain a place at Oxford or Cambridge compared to those in non-selective state schools (Montacute and Cullinane 2018: 3). Indeed, the statistics for the local authority where my study took place are that between 2018 and 2021 there have been just 15 acceptances to Oxbridge in total which represents just 0.6% of the total applications to university for the area (reference withdrawn for anonymity but available on request). In this way, we can see part of the problem space that my research questions intend to address – in particular the research questions surrounding the student experience of applying for Oxbridge and the decision making alongside this. In attempting to understand how this particular sub-field operates, my research seeks to provide some explanations as to why acceptances to Oxbridge are considerably lower in the region in which Northwest Sixth Form College is situated.

A different approach to considering decision-making for the students is provided by Stubbs and Murphy (2020) who looked at what support measures were in place for successful Oxbridge applicants from under-represented groups. Through interviews with students they found there existed a 'staggered process of an imagined future' with features such as the role of former successful applicants offering advice and the influence of key teachers making a difference in their own self-conception in considering themselves as 'Oxbridge material'. Most notable of these key staging

posts was the confirmation through achievement in national assessments (e.g. GCSEs) but also being able to see themselves as 'fitting in' to Oxbridge culture in terms of social class. Unlike their independent school educated peers, comprehensive students struggled with this the most and therefore were later to coming round to a self-confirmation that they were 'Oxbridge material' (Stubbs and Murphy 2020: 522). Of particular note here is the self-identity constructed through national assessments – with the STAR cohort at Northwest Sixth Form College all having at least seven 7s at GCSE, it was therefore interesting to explore the impact this had in how they considered themselves as 'Oxbridge material'.

On a similar theme but in a more covert fashion, the notion of institutional circumstances shaping Oxbridge choices was researched by Donnelly (2014) who used the theoretical framework of Bernstein's work on classification and frame to understand how schools transmit hidden messages about Oxbridge applications in three state schools. In particular he was interested in the minutiae of how this actually happens rather than the simplistic notion of the difference between state and private schools being just that private schools transmit 'a sense of entitlement' to their students. (Donnelly 2014:69). He discovered an institutional culture of how students were considered or not considered 'Oxbridge material' with special assemblies and sessions put on for Sixth Form students who achieved mostly A*/A's at GCSE (Donnelly 2014: 61-62) and thus this 'strong framing' ultimately reduced the options available for students (Donnelly 2014: 59) creating a perception of division between Oxbridge and other universities for the students. In utilising Bernstein's analytical tools, Donnelly was able to pinpoint key institutional mechanisms that although small on their own, when layered together produced a powerful and persuasive message regarding Oxbridge applications. In the context of my object of study the notion of an institutional culture was assessed in terms of analysing the power dimensions within different fields (although not with Bernstein's theoretical lens), including my own role in this as an insider researcher, and this will be developed further in Chapter 3.

In terms of student experience of the Oxbridge Application process was a pivotal study by Byrom, Thompson and Gates (2007) that informed my research design.

They profiled two sixth form students with regards to their applications to university and Oxbridge applications. The two case studies highlighted how whilst the majority of university choices and research remained with sixth form students, the choice of Oxbridge was strongly shaped by institutional circumstances such as market position and reputation. Moreover, the charting of the journey of one of the students in her attendance and participation in Summer School and other Widening Participation Schemes was very similar to the path that some of the STAR students take. Most notable was the articulation of the pressure and the stress that Erin felt going through the academic year (in terms of being 'Oxbridge material' to the point where she purposely underperformed in her A-Levels so that she didn't meet the entry requirements for Oxbridge, such was her worry about 'fitting in' (Byrom et al 2007: 35). This phenomenon is explored further within my own research, particularly around the lived experience of the STAR students.

In an enlightening study of the selection process from a different angle, Zimdars (2010: 308) interviewed selectors from Oxford University, finding that the Oxbridge Application process was neither straightforward nor fair being seen as 'a multi-player game where individual chances of success are dependent on the decisions of powerful institutional gatekeepers.'

Whilst it was true that the selectors looked for certain indicators such as A*/A's (current grades 9-7) at GCSE, other indicators were more subjective with no set formula and a fair degree of discretion, so that there was a perception that the process was partly a risky exercise of 'crystal ball gazing' (Zimdars 2010: 319) as to how an applicant would turn out as an undergraduate. The research also ventured that there was an '…existence of homophily [which] may also lead selectors to view those most like themselves as the least risky admissions choices. This would advantage male, white and professional class applicants.' This therefore shines a light on perceptions of potential applicants as to what is considered as 'Oxbridge material' versus the key attributes and qualities desired from the Oxbridge selection panels themselves (which is also not fully clear). Continuing Zimdars' analogy of a game therefore, it was interesting to pursue how the students of the STAR cohort perceived the rules of the game in terms of applying to Oxbridge and what they

considered to be appropriate 'Oxbridge material'. In some sense, this is what Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) did in a study of undergraduates at Oxford University who had successfully navigated the application process and were reflecting on how it had been. They found that many undergraduates found the applications process flawed and unfair, yet did not want to acknowledge their own advantages in the same system: '… the motivation to legitimate status seems to underlie the disconnect between students' expressed dissatisfaction with schooling inequality and their lack of willingness to alter the admissions process' (Warikoo and Fuhr 2014: 702). In most cases, students perceived their own success to be based on individual merit. Thus, the authors argue that such a stance maintains and perpetuates the elite status of Oxbridge. Indeed, these insights from other angles of the admissions process, particularly from looking back and reflecting on the process is an interesting and fruitful one and formed part of my investigation through not only researching current Oxbridge applicants but also applicants who have been through the process and were able to give consideration to that experience.

Therefore, there is some indication from the literature around the peculiarities/specifics of the Oxbridge application process of key themes that are explored during my research to specifically answer my research questions. Firstly, there was an emphasis on self-identity - an internal 'working out' on the students' behalf about what it meant to consider oneself as 'Oxbridge material', the consequences of that and the way it is manifested within the individual, e.g. confidence or self-esteem and the notion of 'fitting in'. Secondly, there was a theme of the role of the institution in terms of shaping experience and the impact on a day-to-day level on decision-making to opportunities to coping with success and failure. There was also a significant under-researching of charting the student experience at each staging post of the application process, i.e. from deciding to apply through to acceptance or rejection. Finally, there was the theme of social class and Bourdieusian notions of various forms of capital that could underpin and shape an individual's experience of the application process and this will now be explored in the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter has sought to scope out the research terrain and identify the academic literature in which the study of high achieving sixth form students resides. It has identified how terminology has varied and sought to clarify the context for my own object of study in terms of policy. In addition, this chapter has addressed previous research on the experience of high achievers as well as provided an analysis on erstwhile academic studies relating to Oxbridge application and decision making. The next chapter will now look at the theoretical framework that underpins my research.

Chapter 3 – The theoretical framework for research

Having discussed the research literature about what is known about my object of study, this chapter will set out the theoretical framework that is most appropriate for answering my research questions. The chapter begins with an explanation as to why I have chosen to investigate the lived experience of the STAR students and use the term in a specialised way. It then suggests the use of a specific theoretical framework that will uncover the social practice of the high achieving students and explains the key concepts that will be used in the analysis of the findings throughout this thesis.

The emphasis on lived experience

Central to my research questions is the notion of capturing the 'lived experience' of the STAR cohort students and what it is like to a be a high achieving sixth form student going through the Oxbridge application process. Indeed, having been in the English education system since they were four years old, the STAR students are at a significant point in their lives with the final two years of Sixth Form being their last in terms of compulsory education (Woodin et al 2013). Moreover, this is also a key stage of becoming an adult, experiencing a degree of autonomy and self-direction that they have not encountered before (Byrom at al 2007). Therefore, to be able to capture this experience and social practice in an authentic way was a crucial tenet for my research with the emphasis on 'lived experience' being intentional and important to understand my object of study.

Inspired by the writings of Husserl (1970), the term 'lived experience' is often associated with phenomenology (Burch 1990: 132) which looks to question the taken-for-granted everyday 'natural' experiences of life (Shutz and Luckmann 1973) with the aim of gaining a deeper and authentic understanding of such phenomena. Sometimes referred to as the 'lifeworld' (Van Manen 1997) by some branches of phenomenology, it seeks to identify and understand 'meanings and structural essences of a lived experience of which we may have been previously unaware but

are now able to recognise' (Rich, Graham, Taket and Shelley 2013: 500). Indeed, Van Manen (1997) goes further and breaks this down into researching four lifeworlds of lived body, lived time, lived space and lived human relations. Of particular note here is the hermeneutical understanding of lived experience in the context of research. Gadamer (2004: 53) highlights how the original German for this word (drawn from the writings of Heidigger 1927) fuses both the verb and noun of experience to make the word *Erlebnis,* that is experience that makes a 'special impression that gives it lasting importance'. In this sense there are two parts to lived experience: 'the immediacy of experiencing provides the raw material to be shaped through interpretation, reinterpretation, and communication into its lasting form, the experienced' (Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick and Lavoie-Tremblay 2020: 3). Thus, lived experience moves beyond just the experience to what Weick (1995) calls 'the sensemaking process'. Indeed, Coleman et al (2015:359-60) argue that the fundamental difference in researching 'lived experience' as opposed to any other type of experience is that it clarifies a phenomenological and qualitative underpinning that allows an individual's voice to be heard, in their own words and acknowledging that a 'person's experience is what the world is to that person.' In essence, using the prefix 'lived' distances the research from both quantitative elements of research where students could perhaps use scales or statements during research to match their experience (the chosen research methods will be expanded upon in chapter 4) and also from other accounts of experience such as parents speaking on behalf of their child. Therefore, I decided to use lived experience in a specialised way in my research questions to capture the social practice of the STAR students in an authentic manner. This can be seen in the way Boylorn (2008: 490) describes lived experience as:

> '...the representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge.. [it] responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences... Lived experience seeks to understand the distinctions between lives and experiences and tries to understand why some experiences are privileged over others'.

In the context of my own object of study, the 'privileging' of certain experiences over others by the STAR students is crucial as these can shape their dispositions surrounding decision making in particular fields which is pivotal to my third research question.

Whilst many writers advocate that phenomenology and uncovering lived experience in itself can be a sound methodological tool for undertaking research (Frechette et al 2020), because I was trying to uncover the underlying factors in my participants lived experience, I needed theories and concepts that allowed me to access this and to look beneath the surface - a theory of practice. As stated in chapter 1, I was aware that in certain sub-fields such as applying to Oxbridge, there seemed to be a structural unfairness and struggle over resources for the STAR students and I wanted to understand how the sub-field that this practice was located in operated, who ruled it, with what resources, and how actors thought about it. In this respect the work of Pierre Bourdieu offered me a toolkit that made this possible. Indeed, Bourdieu was first and foremost rooted in explaining social data generated by research, with Grenfell (2014a: 215) arguing that he spent most of his career drawing on the data and trying to develop the words for his early ethnographic work such as his first publication on Algeria in 1958. Therefore, the employment of a Bourdieusian lens will now be explored, beginning with his understanding and development of lived experience before looking at his utilisation of key concepts and how they were used to understand my object of study.

Introducing Bourdieu: Beyond phenomenology to thinking tools

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a prolific theorist with a 'voluminous' output who has been described as one of the 'foremost social philosophers of the twentieth century' (Grenfell 2014b:1). In wanting specific tools to go beyond merely describing social practice, Bourdieu had a somewhat complex relationship with phenomenology writing explicit critiques of the theory in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (1992). Primarily this was due to what he saw as phenomenology's failure to go beyond just description of lived experience

and neglecting to investigate taken for granted assumptions and shared meanings regarding the social world (Bourdieu 1992: 26). Thus, he argued that phenomenology promoted an 'occasionalist illusion' in failing to recognise the unconscious structural constraints of the everyday assumptions made about particular fields (Bourdieu 1977: 81), and also charges phenomenology with a lack of reflexivity (Bourdieu 1977: 233) - something which his theory of practice and conceptual toolbox sought to remedy on both counts (an explanation and understanding of Bourdieusian concepts is provided later on in the chapter). Whilst Bourdieu's critique has been rebuffed for being far too broad and general in his definition of phenomenology (Throop and Murphy 2002: 189), as well as mischaracterising phenomenology's intentions and not fully acknowledging the overlaps with his own theory of practice (Throop and Murphy 2002: 191), the parallels, particularly on the emphasis of researching lived experience are striking: Bourdieu would just argue that his theory goes beyond phenomenology in considering how an individual can internalise social structure in a non-conscious way (Throop and Murphy 2002: 193). Indeed, there are a number of academics who make the case that the crossovers with phenomenology are stark, with McNay (2008: 12) posturing that Bourdieu is engaged in 'relational phenomenology' and Atkinson (2020: 5) seeing phenomenology and the relational nature of structuralism as the two 'fundamental elements' of Bourdieusian thought. Moreover, Bourdieu himself, in one of his last writings before his death in 2002, responds to his critics (and specifically to Throop and Murphy 2002) that his intention was always to integrate phenomenological analysis into his deeper approach (Bourdieu 2002: 209).

Thus, whilst I was definitely aware of the phenomenological elements and heritage within the main research questions to research my object of study, I also wanted to uncover more than just experience and Bourdieu's conceptual tools provided me with a way to analyse the lived experience of the STAR students and gave an understanding and way to analyse how their decision making was informed and the underlying mechanisms within the different sub-fields that they inhabited. At the core of Bourdieu's theory of social practice was how social life can be understood in

relation to the conditions and situations around us which he summed up in the following equation (Bourdieu 1984: 101):

'(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice'

Indeed, taken at its literal level, this says that an interaction happens between habitus and capital within the dynamic context of the field that gives us an understanding of social life. For Bourdieu, these three interlocking concepts outline how one's dispositions are influenced by one's circumstances and cannot be isolated from one another. These concepts offered the possibility to explore the dynamics and terrain of the lived experience of the high achieving students in the STAR cohort, the lived experience in going through the Oxbridge Application process and an understanding of decision-making processes. They also enabled me to go beyond the surface to a theory of practice and each concept will now be explained in more detail before considering other useful concepts in the Bourdieusian 'toolbox' and highlighting how they were of use to my own object of study.

Field

Field is the social space in which interactions, events and transactions occur and is a fundamental component of Bourdieu's theory of practice alongside habitus and capital. The connotations of the translation of the concept of field is key as Thomson (2014: 66) reminds us that despite the English conception of the word 'field' being perhaps a beautiful wildflower meadow (*le pré* in French), it is in fact *le champ* which is used to describe among other things 'a battle field'. Thus, at its core is the notion of a contested space where social interaction takes place and power is reproduced:

> 'I define field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 72-3)

Consequently, at the heart of the concept of field is the notion that there is a struggle over and for resources with different agents within any given field jostling in competition for a particular resource (with the 'winner' often doing so at the expense and marginalisation of others). In the context of my own study, this may be the struggle to achieve high grades or might be the competition to gain access to the elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge with only a finite number of places available.

Therefore, one's position in any given field is far from static and is instead in a complex state of flux being shaped and shaping in a symbiotic relationship with habitus. The field develops one's habitus depending on one's position and the differing habitus within a field contributes to a changing structure of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989:44) (see below for explanation of habitus). The position one holds within a particular field is largely determined by the amount or volume of capitals that one holds (see below for further development of capitals) and the social space within the field is semi-autonomous (Thompson 2014:68) but governed by its own set of beliefs or doxa (see further below for an explanation of the rules of the game). Large fields can be divided into sub-fields and field positions can literally be plotted depending on the data collected and through an analysis of the capitals held. Through mapping the field, one is able to understand the relationships of the actors within the field and the 'fit' between habitus and field (Bourdieu 2000: 134).

To use the example of my own object of study, we could take the field of education and subdivide it into smaller fields such as the Sixth Form College or the Oxbridge Application Process. We could then look at the power relations within those sub-fields e.g of an Oxford admissions tutor or a sixth form student Oxbridge applicant. Following this we could then assess the various symbolic and other capitals accrued in these positions and assess the habitus displayed by these agents and the dispositions that are signalled. Using such Bourdieusian tools, we are then able to construct a sense of the lived experience of the participants of this field (more will be developed on this in a discussion on using Bourdieusian tools as a methodology).

Habitus

Habitus has been described as an 'enigmatic' concept that has become popular (overly so in some cases – Reay 2004), transcending many disciplines, but also widely misused and misunderstood (Maton 2014: 48). However, it is important for my study as it is a key tool in explaining the decisions and intentions at the heart of the lived experience of the high achieving STAR students. At its core, habitus encapsulates why we do the things we do. Why in any given situation, we act as we do, make decisions as we do and ultimately, take a specific action from the choices we perceive in front of us. Habitus is thought and reasoning yet also physical and expressive. It is in our internal monologues and our physical expressions, our responses to questions and in our gait (Maton 2014). For Bourdieu, habitus begins from reconciling notions of structure and agency: 'all of my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?' (Bourdieu 1990: 65). Everyday life brings a sense of freedom but there is a predictability or regularity in how things play out (e.g. how children from middle class families do better at school (Reay 2007; Brantlinger 2003). Thus, for Bourdieu (1990: 170), habitus is the output of a 'structuring and structured structure', as Maton (2014: 50) further explains:

> 'It is "structured" by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is "structuring" in that one's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices. It is a "structure" in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned. This "structure" comprises a system of - dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices.'

Such dispositions, which Bourdieu also refers to as 'tendencies, propensity or inclinations' (Bourdieu 1977: 214), are durable and transposable (Bourdieu 1993: 87) and an insight into social practice. This was used when considering my object of study for example in trying to comprehend the dispositions related to applying to Oxbridge. However, crucially for Bourdieu, social practice is not simply habitus being acted out through dispositions informed by one's upbringing in a pre-programed automatic way, rather practice is due to an 'unconscious relationship' (Bourdieu

1993: 76) or 'obscure and double relation' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 126) with a field and an individual's position within that field in terms of capital (see below for further elucidation of this). Thus, habitus is constantly evolving and being modified, shaped by prior history and current context which in turn shapes future choices and possibilities. Most importantly, habitus is not set in stone and can be challenged and often re-shaped by disruption, such as the experience of applying to Oxbridge. Moreover, disruption can be intense, creating what Bourdieu terms a 'hysteresis of habitus' (Bourdieu 1977: 83). This is when there is a profound disruption or change (such as during this research with the Covid-19 Pandemic) that causes a lagged adaptation of habitus (this will be considered further later on in this chapter).

Fundamental to Bourdieu's writings is the notion that habitus can never be considered without an analysis of field and capital and to use habitus on its own as a replacement (for example) understanding of family background, diminishes it's intended use and is a misapplication (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96-7). Indeed, to see habitus as anything but being relational to field and capital is a misunderstanding with Maton (2014: 62) warning against 'namechecking a currently high-status concept'. Therefore, to capture habitus one must only look at dispositions in relation to field and capital otherwise research can become concerned with solely 'individual idiosyncrasies' (Grenfell 2014a: 223) devoid of context and meaning. Indeed, Costa, Burke and Murphy (2019) warn of the difficulty in uncovering habitus and the role of the researcher in deciding which dispositions are relevant for the research. Such notions of privileging are important and key to the idea of reflexivity which was also a central part of Bourdieu's project (Wacquant 1992: 36) and will be explained further in chapters 4 and 7. Notwithstanding, habitus was an essential concept in uncovering the social practice of the STAR students and (in conjunction with field and capital) provided a pivotal understanding of the lived experience of high achieving STAR students and gave an insight into their dispositions regarding their decision making experience during the Oxbridge application process.

Capital

The concept of capital is a fundamental element to Bourdieu's theory of practice and is often overlooked or downgraded at the expense of habitus (Reay 2004). Capital is a set of 'actually usable resources and powers' (Bourdieu 1984:114) (sometimes tangible) that can be exchanged or built upon. Bourdieu (1986: 242) conceived of three main forms: economic, cultural and social and these were considered a way of measuring and understanding a person's position within any given field (See Hardy 2014a for more on the literal mapping of social space). Using the example of the field of education gives us the opportunity to gain further understanding of these concepts. The most straightforward of these is the notion of economic capital i.e. the accumulation of money and its different forms. In this way one can see how having more economic capital can advantage an individual within a school setting, such as having the means to be able to afford a private tutor in preparation for an examination (Atkinson, Gregg and McConnell 2006). Social capital is often demonstrated in how individuals can gain an advantage in the connections that are formed and the 'nod and the wink' from a shared association. Within university applications, much has been said about the 'old boys network' and how knowing the right people can advantage a particular applicant applying to an elite university such as Oxford or Cambridge (Watters 2016). Finally, cultural capital was originally intended to account 'for otherwise inexplicable differences in academic performance with children of unequal cultural patrimonies and, more generally, in all kinds of cultural or economic practices' (Bourdieu 2005:2). It has developed into explaining a person's position in a field depending on how much 'culture' they have accrued and the arbitrary nature of this (e.g attending a Shakespeare play could represent higher cultural capital than attending a pantomime or being more comfortable in an Oxbridge setting could also be an indicator of this). Whilst many other capitals have also been developed (e,g. scientific - Bourdieu 2004), a significant mention must also be given to symbolic capital which Bourdieu developed to explain how economies of 'honour', 'good faith' and other symbolic exchanges take place (Bourdieu 2005: 2). Thus, in the context of my own research, I was able to ascertain and gauge the levels of capital

exhibited by the high achieving STAR students to better understand their field positions in the struggle for resources.

Capital can also be objectified - represented in a material sense; embodied - become incorporated within an individual and manifested through dispositions or preferences; or institutionalised - a distinct form of objectification such as educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986: 242). This can be most apparent with cultural capital where we could perhaps notice higher amounts of objectified cultural capital through the attendance at museums or art galleries and higher amounts of embodied cultural capital through a certain cultural taste or distinction (Bourdieu 1984). However, who gets to decide which type of culture has more 'value' is extremely questionable (Lamont and Lareau 1988) and more will be discussed in the critique of Bourdieu later on in this chapter. Certainly, of great importance with this study was the notion of academic achievement and institutionalised capital in the form of GCSE and A-Level qualifications and what this represented in the struggle for resources for the STAR students. In addition, the perceived lack of social and cultural capital by the STAR students themselves formed a crucial part of their lived experience in certain sub-fields.

For Burke (2015: 9) capital is a crucial element in understanding social position and therefore, 'Capital removes the element of chance in the games we play. It decides the path not taken'. In this way we can see how middle-class families who possess higher levels of capital would be advantaged in educational settings (Brantlinger 2003; Reay 2007). Therefore, in understanding the levels of capital that an individual accrues, it is possible to locate an individual's position within a particular social space or field. For Grenfell (2014a: 266):

> 'Capital is what oils the wheels of social mechanisms. Because the nature of any logic of practice is at base to produce distinction and differentiation, some forms of capital will always be valued more than others.'

Thus, the distribution of capital in identifying the amount (or lack) of capital within my object of study was decisive as it gave me an insight into the power differentials within the sub-fields of the Sixth form college and the university application system. For example, for Bourdieu, inequality, particularly within education, is concerned

with the lack of cultural, social and economic capital present within lower social groups and so '…the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world' (Bourdieu 1984: 106). Not only did understanding the levels of capital within particular fields (and sub-fields) help describe the reality of the lived experience of the high achieving STAR students, it also exposed and shone a light on potential injustice and what could be done to change this.

Rules of the game

Before looking at some of Bourdieu's lesser-known concepts, it is worth briefly mentioning how the three analytical tools of field, habitus and capital work together to form a theory of social practice. In an often-quoted extended metaphor, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990: 66) compares this theory of practice to a game in which individuals participating in a particular field are contestants (differentiated by the amount of capital they possess) competing against one another to maintain or increase capital. For Bathmaker (2015: 66), the idea of a game suggests a sense of rules but also strategy, with participation signifying a commitment that the 'investment is worthwhile.' However, the important notion to underscore is that this is a game, not a system that has been designed. In this way we can see the balance between structure and agency in that there are some rules but the field is also dynamic and complex with varying degrees of autonomy (Wacquant 2007: 269) within the field itself that can provoke struggles (even on how the rules are defined themselves (Bourdieu 1991: 66)). However, if social life is a game or a competition in which one knows that there will be winners and losers, skirmishes and strife, why would one take part unless you knew the odds were in your favour? For Bourdieu (2000: 16), the concept of Doxa is central and is used to describe the 'natural' pre-reflexive shared set of opinions and beliefs about a given field. They are unquestioned and taken for granted assumptions in which, 'what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying', where 'the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition' (Bourdieu 1977: 165– 7). This can be seen in terms

of my own object of study in how the STAR students applying to Oxbridge, did not question the system or process or how it was done. Therefore, people play the game and the way it appears to be ordered (e.g. in terms of hierarchy or power relations) because that is the way it appears to have always been done and so the prevailing doxa is reproduced becoming the 'cornerstone' of the field (Deer 2014: 116).

Thus, we can begin to get a sense of the doxa through the misrecognition (see later in this chapter for an explanation) of the shared unquestioning loyalty to the 'rules of the game' demonstrated by agents within the same field and also an understanding of the structural underpinning of who controls the game and why:

> 'The adherence expressed in the doxic relation to the social world is the absolute form of recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness, since it is unaware of the very question of legitimacy, which arises from competition for legitimacy, and hence from conflict between groups claiming to possess it.' (Bourdieu 1977: 168)

When considering how social life can be considered as a game using Bourdieu's theory of practice for my object of study, the sub-field of the Oxbridge application process can be seen as the site for a struggle over resources with its own distinctive shared understanding. Within this sub-field there is competition by students for limited resources (a place at a prestigious university), a power dynamic between academic gatekeepers and applicants (who possess varying degrees of capital) and an over-riding doxa of the way the field works (submission of an academic personal statement, difficult entrance exam and several interviews culminating in only twenty percent being 'successful'). Crucially the practice within this sub-field is far from mechanistic (Schiff 2009: 15) with some autonomy and an element of improvisation for the agents within the sub-field but this is bounded by the doxa of the sub-field (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and the dominant agents within the Oxbridge application process (the Oxbridge admissions tutors).

Conatus

Perhaps one of Bourdieu's lesser known concepts and not widely used, Conatus can be translated as 'life trajectory' (Fuller 2014: 169) and is described by Bourdieu in *Homo Academicus* (1988: 176), as being:

> '...that combination of dispositions and interests associated with a particular class of social position which inclines agents to strive to reproduce at a constant or an increasing rate the properties constituting their social identity, without even needing to do this deliberately or consciously.'

Whilst there has been some discussion as to how and whether conatus differs from habitus (Fuller 2014: 172), crucial to understanding my object of study is the notion of reproduction at 'an increasing rate'. In this way, conatus describes how a person's habitus can be understood in terms of momentum and enables one to step back and make sense of the bigger picture. Bourdieu highlights several examples of conatus in practice such as the tension of inheriting conatus when examining a father/son dynamic (Bourdieu 1999: 508) or in his analysis of matrimonial strategies in the Béarn region of Southwest France (Bourdieu 1998: 107). Moreover, when an individual considers their own conatus, it is often rationalised in much the same way that one might think of as fate. In the words of Fuller (2014: 173), 'The mark of conatus is that people adjust their subjective expectations to match their objective chances'. This is of particular relevance when considering the life chances of the high achieving STAR students and their own framing and re-framing of how opportunities and significant events (e.g. an Oxbridge interview) are presented to them and how the subsequent outcomes from them are conceptualised and internalised. Thus, whilst habitus can be used to describe an individual's disposition and decision making within a field setting and particularly within a critical moment or event, conatus gives an over-arching sense longer term of the insight and justification given to such events in both a retrospective way (e.g. hindsight) or forward looking way (e.g. career path). In this way conatus was a key tool to help understand how the STAR students made sense and rationalised to themselves

incidents that put them on a particular academic trajectory and is closely linked to symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence and misrecognition

For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is a way in which social hierarchy is maintained by the dominant classes and is 'the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu 1977: 67). Bourdieu (1992: 209-210) argues that symbolic violence occurs when systems of classification are misrecognised as 'natural' or 'just the way it is' and is seen by some scholars to be no less 'gentler' than physical violence (Schubert 2014: 181) and in fact can be 'a more effective, and (in some instances) more brutal means of oppression' (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992:115). Central to an understanding of this concept is Bourdieu's focus on education and the symbolic violence that occurs from an inappropriate fit between habitus and field. Using the example of the opening up of the school and university system to the lower classes in the 1950s and 60s, Bourdieu maintained that the whole education system was structured to serve the interests of the middle and upper classes, from the way the school day was organised to the language used, making his point that 'pedagogic action is objectively a symbolic violence to the extent to which it is an imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990: 18). The tension and ultimately lack of fit between lower class habitus and the education field led to poor results with many students dropping out. The symbolic violence occurs in the blaming of these students (or their parents) for their poor performance and the social class hierarchy continuing to be reproduced.

In a similar way, a first-generation Oxbridge applicant who is unfamiliar with Oxbridge systems and processes (such as the applicants at Northwest Sixth Form College) could be put on edge and left confused during an interview because of language differences about time (Michaelmas, Hilary and Trinity are the names for the three academic terms) or not knowing the correct pronunciation of Oxford colleges such as Gonville and Caius or Magdalene to the correct way to behave at a

formal dinner. The violence might be considered gentle or mild but it is tangible, often being difficult to recognise and hard to resist: 'Symbolic domination … is something you absorb like air, something you don't feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult' (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Eagleton 1992e: 115). Indeed, high achieving sixth form students could misrecognise such symbolic violence for their own inadequacy and therefore, symbolic violence at its worst is the 'resigned passivity' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 93) it induces on an individual in accepting the circumstances presented to them. This raises important issues regarding the STAR students and their access to the sub-fields within my study, and it was interesting to note the equity (or lack of) within these spaces and their understanding of 'the rules of the game' (as examined earlier in this chapter). Moreover, as discussed in relation to my researcher positionality, I have a pivotal role in preparing students in the STAR cohort, and while my intentions are always to do the best for my students there is a possibility that I am responsible for symbolic violence done unto them in supporting, albeit in a passive way, the dominance of the prevailing culture that (mis)recognises entry to Oxbridge as achievement – this will be expanded upon further in chapters 4 and 7.

Hysteresis

On the back of a worldwide pandemic, hysteresis is aptly described as 'a versatile concept for volatile times' (Graham 2020: 451) and was useful in studying how the high achieving STAR students adapted to the changes such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This concept was extremely beneficial when considering notions of change and disruption particularly in terms of time and place e.g. changes to the location and rhythm of daily college life (that was detailed in Chapter 1). Its roots can be traced back as a scientific term first used by Ewing in the 1880's that was used to describe the mismatch or lag in changes in magnetic torsion (Hardy 2014b: 128). For Bourdieu, hysteresis is a technical term used to describe the disruption that occurs when there is a change or crisis within the field:

> 'The hysteresis of habitus, which is inherent in the social conditions of the reproduction of the structures in habitus, is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities and, in particular, of the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past.' (Bourdieu 1977: 83)

The key point here is the notion of a 'lag' in time i.e. the gap between a profound field change and the continuation of an old habitus that has yet to catch up. Hysteresis is therefore when an individual encounters a new or evolved field but is still employing a historical habitus based on a false anticipation of the historical field (Bourdieu 2000: 8). This is the moment when the 'feel for the game' is no longer fit for purpose and becomes a kind of 'maladapted habitus' (Graham 2020: 452) or 'unsettledness' of habitus (Strand and Lizardo 2017). In the context of my object of study, hysteresis was useful in analysing the lag in terms of everyday educational life and the shift to Oxbridge preparation or the subsequent field change from Oxbridge preparation to the actual concrete encounters of the Oxbridge interview. Moreover, it was the fact that the research occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic when lockdown restrictions were in place and the biggest disruption to schooling for a generation ensued that made hysteresis a useful analytical tool.

Institutional habitus

The final concept of use as a tool to unlock my understanding of my object of study is institutional habitus that is notable in that it has been developed from an existing Bourdieusian concept but not practised by Bourdieu himself. First used by McDonough (1997) as 'organisational habitus' and later developed by Reay (1998) as 'institutionalised habitus', the concept was defined as being 'the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' (Reay 1998: 521). At its core is how (in the context of education) there could be a 'school effect' or 'intervening variable' (Reay, David and Ball 2001: 2) that affects the lives of students. In this way, for example, Reay et al (2001) articulated how institutional wide processes such as careers advice or curriculum offer could have a lasting effect on individual students. Indeed, in the context of my

own object of study – Northwest Sixth Form College – it proved to be a conceptual springboard in accounting for the role the college and my own role plays in influencing decision making amongst sixth form students and my complicity within this is discussed in detail in chapter 7. Most notably, this could be seen in the dominance of the STAR programme in pushing forward ideas of applying to elite universities through tutorials, lessons and even in terms of physical space (the college had an oak panelled room to mimic an Oxbridge Don's study).

Whilst there has been some debate regarding the proliferation and extensions of Bourdieusian concepts (Atkinson 2011), the usefulness of such endeavours (Maton 2014) and whether they survive intense academic scrutiny (Atkinson 2013), the term does account for a structural examination of organisations as collectives of individuals and provides a way to scrutinise the power dynamics within a particular field or sub-field and how an 'individuals dispositions are mediated through an institution's organisational practice' (Burke, Emmerich and Ingram (2013: 165). In this sense, institutional habitus provided a way to understand the structural processes that underpinned the Sixth Form College and the STAR Programme in particular. Moreover, as the STAR Manager – in charge of the cohort of high achieving students – the concept gave a fresh understanding of the role that I played within the organisation, the dispositions that are articulated as a representative of college, and the degree of power and autonomy that is utilised within the sub-field of the Sixth Form College. Thus, whilst (Atkinson 2013: 185-6) sees it as an example of 'inferior vocabulary', I used the concept of institutional habitus as a device (that has already been successfully used on a number of occasions (Byrd 2019)) to understand the structural dynamic of a given sub-field and to scrutinise my own role within this (this will be discussed further in chapters 4 and 7).

Therefore, having discussed the concepts that were used in my research, the next section will briefly look at some of the major criticisms of Bourdieu before concluding this chapter with my understanding of how the concepts worked together to create a structuralist methodology.

Criticisms of Bourdieu

Although Bourdieu offers much scope and flexibility with his 'thinking tools' in that they can be applied in a variety of settings, this is also seen as a theoretical weakness creating ambiguity (Swartz 1981) and a conceptual 'looseness' (Robbins 2000: 107). Indeed, this can be seen perhaps with a concept such as cultural capital that could be understood as 'alternatively an informal academic standard, a class attribute, a basis for social selection, and a resource for power' (Lamont and Lareau 1988). This in turn makes analysis and systematic comparison difficult when trying to compare how one piece of research interprets a particular concept with another. However, even some of his fiercer critics acknowledge that the sheer volume of his scholarship is part of the problem (Jenkins 1992: 12) and so this can lead to criticisms that are an 'impoverishing simplification' (Yang 2014: 1538) of Bourdieu's thoughts. Indeed, Pouliot (2013) guards against taking any shortcuts when considering Bourdieu's work and in the context of my own study, I was conscious to set out how I fully understood the thinking tools and how they could be applied to my own object of study.

Secondly, Bourdieu's mapping of a field and the documenting of the underlying principles that constitute it has been criticised for lacking illumination of the forces and processes in the way they are (re)produced, with Naidoo (2004: 468) likening it to 'viewing cinematic stills exclusively at the beginning and at the end of a sequence of actions – we are not able to view the series of steps by which the initial action relates to the final action.' Similarly, Maton (2004: 45) argues that Bourdieu offers a way of seeing a particular field but asserts that there are better ways in conceptualising the field. Bourdieu however, would argue that his conceptual tools do precisely look at underlying structural forces and the cyclical nature and significant depth provided by his specific field analysis (detailed at the end of this chapter) make substantial inroads in not only conceptualising the field but also for understanding social practice.

Perhaps one of the biggest charges levelled at Bourdieu is his inability to account for social change, often being accused of being deterministic. Writing about Bourdieu and Passeron, Bredo and Feinberg (1979: 317) assert:

> 'Their inability to find any convincing method for changing the relations of dominance that are found in the educational system highlights a much more serious problem with their system – it is the inability to account for any significant social change at all. In part this failure can be accounted for by one key assumption that seems to pervade their book. This is the notion that the habitus that is reproduced in the lower classes by the school must inevitably be a carbon copy, albeit fainter than the original that is found in the dominant group.'

This emphasis on 'equilibrium and the reproduction of social relations at the expense of individual and collective actions that produce change' (Hayward, 2004: 13) is perhaps missing the point (Peters 2013) in that Bourdieu is, if anything, embracing determinism:

> '…as a sociologist, it's not for me to be "for determinism" or "for freedom", but to discover necessity, if it exists, in the places where it is. Because all progress in the knowledge of the laws of the social world increases the degree of perceived necessity, it is natural that social science is increasingly accused of "determinism" the further it advances. But, contrary to appearances, it's by raising the degree of perceived necessity and giving a better knowledge of the laws of the social world that social science gives more freedom. All progress in knowledge of necessity is a progress in *possible* freedom … A law that is unknown is a nature, a destiny … a law that is known appears as a possibility of freedom.' (Bourdieu 1993: 24-5)

For Bourdieu, it could be argued that he is highlighting how he sees the world and it is through his theory of practice we can gain a better understanding of this world. Moreover, it is through the interpreters of his conceptual tools that his ideas can be applied (e.g. Reay et al 2005). Therefore, in considering my own object of study I was mindful of committing to an analysis that not only satisfied my own research questions and uncovered the lived experience of the STAR cohort and their experience of the Oxbridge application process, but also understood the social practice of my object of study.

Using the conceptual tools for analysis: Toward a structuralist methodology

This chapter so far has highlighted the conceptual tools that were used to analyse my object of study, most notably around the core concepts of field, capital and habitus but also in the way the 'rules of the game' operates and the use of other concepts such as symbolic violence and hysteresis. In applying such tools to address my research questions and indeed to fully understand the lived experience of high achieving STAR students, there is academic precedent. Demonstrating a synthesis of Phenomenology and Bourdieu, Charlesworth (2000: 23) in an analysis of working class culture in Rotherham, emphasised how experience was embodied within individuals and so therefore it was vitally important to use Bourdieu's tools to research lived experience to fully understand 'the way they *live* their bodies and *live* their marks as working class people (original emphasis)'. Indeed, as highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, the emphasis on using the term 'lived experience' for this study is to highlight that at the heart of this research is the authentic voice of the high achieving students of the STAR cohort and these Bourdieusian tools enabled me to access that. Moreover, as documented in chapter 2, several studies have utilised Bourdieu and gained a deep understanding in terms of habitus and capital related to university application and elite universities (Bathmaker 2016; Perez-Adamson and Mercer 2016; Zimdars et al 2009; Reay et al 2005) and so I was confident that these were the right tools to analyse my own object of study (this will be justified further below and in chapter 4).

In deciding to use this Bourdieusian toolbox, many critics have warned against just 'dipping in' (Reay 2004) and have argued that one must commit to a full use of engagement with the concepts. Indeed, Grenfell (2014a: 226) notes the danger of simply metaphorizing data to put a 'Bourdieusian gloss on a more conventional narrative'. For Bourdieu this represents a radical yet difficult approach in terms of methodology with the analysis of the very language one uses in research at the heart of it:

> 'Beware of words…Common language is the repository of the accumulated common sense of past generations, both lay and scientific, as crystallised in occupational taxonomies, names of groups, concepts…and so on. The most

routine categories…(e.g., young and old, 'middle class' and 'upper-middle class') are naturalized pre-constructions, which, when they are ignored as such, function as unconscious and uncontrolled instruments of scholarly construction.'

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989:54-5)

In this sense Bourdieu is highlighting how taken for granted assumptions concerning potential objects of study or supposedly shared understandings of central concepts should be treated with suspicion for fear of building in misrecognition from the outset of research. Indeed, his advice that the 'preconstructed is everywhere' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 235) serves to alert my own research when considering value-laden terms such as 'high achieving' (see chapter 2) but also considering ideas around being a 'sixth form student' or notions of 'Oxbridge'. In order to combat this, Bourdieu suggests deconstructing such terms linguistically and 'breaking with common sense' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 235) in order to gain a deeper understanding and indeed, in applying these concepts with academic rigour, as opposed to selective pragmatism, I intended to examine the underlying basis of social practices for my object of study.

The answer for Bourdieu was to think relationally using his conceptual tools to break down levels of complexity by examining social structures inherent in any social practice and thus he advocated a three-stage methodology for creating and undertaking research: construction of the research project, three-level field analysis and participant objectivication.

The initial construction of the research project was an opportunity to interrogate and test the particular object of study and associated sites of analysis. In effect this is being aware of not seeing constructs as 'things in themselves but rather as sets of relations' (Grenfell 2014a: 220). As was highlighted in chapter 1 and in chapters 4 and 7, this is part of the reflexive journey in engaging with positionality and cross-examining how the choice of research topic is shaped by one's own background as well as considering the assumptions that are made regarding constructs surrounding the study of high achieving sixth form students.

The specific field analysis was outlined by Bourdieu when questioned by his former student and collaborator Loic Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104-7):

1. Analyse the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power.
2. Map out the objective structure of relations between the positions occupied by agents who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which the field is a site.
3. Analyse the habitus of agents; the systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalizing a deterministic type of social and economic condition.

In this way level 1 would look at the relationship of the field in relation to other fields. Level 2 would consider the different positions within the field(s) with specific reference to capitals and their value. Level 3 would look at individual agents within the field and their habitus and relationship with the field and other agents. In utilising such an approach for field analysis, the fullest possible understanding of the logic of practice can be achieved and links can be made between fields, capitals and habitus to map the objects of research.

The final part of Bourdieu's methodology is participant objectivication which he describes as:

> 'I mean by that the one that dispossesses the knowing subject of the privilege it normally grants itself and that deploys all available instruments of objectification … in order to bring to light the presuppositions it owes to its inclusion in the object of knowledge.' (Bourdieu 2000: 10)

This in effect is being truly reflexive and recognising one's own role in the research process (this will be discussed further in chapters 4 and 7). However, it is more than just an awareness, rather it is subjecting the same level of analysis on oneself as one would to their objects of study and positioning oneself at every stage of the research. Indeed, as Grenfell and James (1998: 176) argue: 'Only a reflexive method guards against an overly constructed interpretation, where the researchers' conclusions can be regarded as the uncovering of a God-given truth'. For this reason, chapter 7 will apply the Bourdieusian tools on myself and the role I played in conducting this research.

Therefore, in advocating to adopt a Bourdieusian methodology, I was, in the words of Hardy (2014a: 249), committing:

> '…to a process which is relational, cyclic and complex, but one which is capable of providing a dynamic representation of human activity and one which deepens one's understanding of the interrelationships between objective structures and personal lived experiences.**'**

What that looked like in practice will now be discussed in the next chapter in relation to my research methodology, justification of methods, discussion of ethics and the process of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter sets out the reasoning behind my methodology and it's Bourdieusian structuralist foundation, justification of the choices of research methods and data analysis and a discussion of ethical considerations. From the outset, the aims of the study were to answer the following research questions:

- What are the students' lived experiences of being identified as a high achieving Sixth Form Student?
- What is the lived experience of high achieving students in preparing and going through the Oxbridge application process?
- How are their decisions informed in applying to Oxbridge?

For Waring (2021: 16), the journey of justifying research can be framed by four interlinked questions:

'1: Ontology – what is the form and nature of the social world?

2: Epistemology – how can what is assumed to exist be known?

3: Methodology – what procedure or logic be followed?

4: Methods – What techniques of data collection be used?'

The relationship of such assumptions then forms a powerful logic which underpins the research and the possibilities of exploration for the researcher. As discussed in chapter 3, Bourdieu's work was rooted in understanding structural mechanisms within society, but he also sought to locate the individual within their own social structural multidimensional setting (Seidman 2017: 146), thus becoming a 'meeting of two evolving histories, embodied in the logics of the context and of actors' dispositions' (Maton 2013: 20). In terms of my research, in wanting to address a real life issue (Crotty 1998: 13) in terms of understanding the lived experience of the STAR students and their application process to Oxbridge, I too wanted to understand the structural underpinnings of this social practice but also in a relational manner as to the individuals and their dispositions within such structures. Therefore, my ontology and epistemology reflected this position to fully address and answer my research questions.

Ontology and epistemology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of the social world and our assumptions about it and is crucial for the researcher in underpinning certain conceptions of an object of study. For Mason (2018: 4), the very idea one has an ontological position (as opposed to just familiarity with components of the social world) can be a difficult idea to comprehend as 'this suggests that there may be different versions of the nature, character and essence of social things.' Yet how one considers the entities of the social world and their properties is vital due to the influence this has on research (Mason 2018: 6). Distilling down various ontological positions, Bryman (2012: 32-33) views ontology as answering the fundamental question of whether we consider social phenomena to be objective (and therefore have an existence that is external to social actors) or whether social entities are built upon from the perceptions and actions of social actors in a process of social construction. For Clark, Foster, Sloan, and Bryman (2021: 28), this is framed as opposing positions of objectivism and constructionism.

Therefore, my ontological position is largely objectivist in that in seeking to uncover the social practice of the STAR cohort, I understood social phenomena and their meanings as being 'categories that we use in everyday discourse hav[ing] an existence that is independent of, or separate from, social actors' (Clark, Foster, Sloan and Bryman 2021:28). In this way I understood the organisation or hierarchy of an institution (such as Northwest Sixth Form College) as external to the individuals who inhabit it and using the Bourdieusian toolkit I comprehended certain fields and sub-fields (such as the Oxbridge application process) as having its own structure and social order. This enabled me to fully uncover the social practices that are affected by such structures.

If ontology considers the nature of the social world, epistemology considers how the social world should be studied. Considered a 'peculiar terror' for some researchers (Jenkins 1992: 45) owing to an over-complication of what he considers to be a simple matter, epistemology at its core involves thinking about what the researcher 'would count as evidence or knowledge of the kinds of ontological

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properties that you think comprise the social world' (Mason 2018: 7). Some of the issues at stake here are how the researcher considers what knowledge actually is and how it is acquired. Jenkins (1992: 46) views this process through asking oneself thought provoking questions about the object of study on both a practical and theoretical basis:

> 'How do I know x? How is it possible to say that I know x? What is the status or authority of my knowledge of x? And so on.'

My epistemological stance is narrowed by my view of how social reality is constructed in my desire to be consistent and be credible with my research. However, this is not a mere formality and I am mindful of Mason's (2018: 9) advice that for any given piece of research there are multiple positions that generate difference assumptions regarding what constitutes knowledge and how it is collected. The important point for Mason is that one is a 'critical epistemological thinker' and it is not automatic. For Bourdieu, epistemology was both complex and relational (Robbins 1998) – even at the ancient root of the term in which Aristotle distinguishes between knowledge, *episteme*, and the taken for granted assumptions, *doxa* (Fine 2021) – Bourdieu's theory of practice questions what we actually count as knowledge in probing such assumptions. Therefore, in a bid to transcend this sense of dualism (and others), Bourdieu outlined his own branch of epistemology which will now be considered.

Bourdieu and an epistemological break

When considering Bourdieu's epistemological position, Robbins (1998:28) argues that one must understand this in terms of piecing together the contexts and approaches of his lifetime's work and research instead of there being one explicit expression of his critical stance. Indeed, he asserts that:

> 'Bourdieu adopted the view that epistemological difficulties could be resolved by requiring knowers deliberately to construct an alternative perspective on 'common-sense' knowledge or 'everyday' events. Hence…the need for an epistemological break. Bourdieu's attempt to carry out

philosophically motivated research on education has been an attempt to rethink our everyday assumptions about educational practices.'

Certainly, what we can draw from Bourdieu's work is a determination to overcome dualisms such as subjective/objective or structure/agency to a position whereby the study of the social world can overcome such division and study the individual within a multi-dimensional space such as a field (Seidman 2017: 146). Whilst some writers have ventured that we would now consider Bourdieu to be part of a post-structuralist tradition (Calhoun 2002), it is his conceptual tools – in particular of habitus, capitals and field – that provide the researcher with an epistemological outlook on the nature of social reality. For Bourdieu, analysing the habitus within particular contexts and power dynamics is an effective way of engaging with an object of study. Seidman (2017: 146) sums this up as follows:

> '...individuals who share a structural or class position have similar, repetitive experiences that produce a common habitus which, in turn, structures their social practices – sets out guidelines and limits but allows for individual innovation. Hence, individuals are neither totally free agents nor passive products of social structure; social life is neither exclusively subjective nor made up of only - meanings and voluntary actions, nor exclusively objective or driven by social - structural processes and experienced as constrained or coercive.'

Whilst there has been some criticism as to how successful this approach has been (see criticisms of Bourdieu in chapter 3) particularly in terms of being too deterministic, Bourdieu does try to find a way through looking at the social world both objectively and subjectively (Jenkins 1992: 48) and to see both structure and agency within his objects of study to describe social action and behaviour. In this way, I also employed this epistemological outlook as it enabled me to fully satisfy my research questions in not only being able to understand the structural elements of the high achieving STAR students such as the STAR programme or the Oxbridge Application process but also to understand how social actors interacted and experienced such spaces. Thus, through Bourdieu's conceptual tools I was able to use a relational epistemology (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97) that shone a light

on the lived experience of the high achieving students and how their decision making was informed.

Having therefore discussed the ontology and epistemology for this thesis, I will now examine the research methods that were utilised to fully uncover and research my object of study.

Ethnography

In wanting to employ research methods that would fully satisfy my research questions and uncover the lived experience of the STAR cohort I decided to use ethnographic techniques - a particular group of methods that were also fundamental to Bourdieu's research and theorising. Indeed, Blommaert (2005: 224) describes it as the 'backbone' of his work and this can be seen in various forms from his discussions on Algerian workers to his study on French academia, with one of his most famous works, *Distinction*, announcing (in a rather overstated fashion) that it 'can be read as a sort of ethnography of France' (Bourdieu 1984: xi). Whilst mindful to match the appropriate research method to the object of study, as a researcher who was part of the field that I wished to study (as will be discussed below), there was a logic to using ethnographic techniques to illuminate these fields further as I was part of the object of study and part of the sub-fields that I wished to study.

For Bourdieu, the process always started with the motive of a research question to collect data first before theorising later and it is only then through an immersion in the analysis that a 'rupture with the pre-constructed' (Grenfell 2014a: 214-15) could occur. In this sense, I identified a problem space in wanting to know more about the STAR students and their decision making processes, but also recognised inherent issues in being an 'insider researcher' (as will be discussed in this chapter) and therefore needed an epistemological outlook and research method that not only uncovered my object of study but also provided sufficient scrutiny to my own unique role as STAR manager but also as a researcher. Therefore, to use particular ethnographic techniques and then analyse using Bourdieusian tools was the best fit

to uncover the lived experience of the high achieving students and this will now be explained.

Primarily, using ethnographic techniques that explored the lived experience of the STAR cohort was essential because it uncovered how the students themselves viewed the world as they negotiated their way through Sixth Form life. The term ethnography is defined by Hammersley (2007) as 'writing an account of the way of life of a particular people' and in this way I am looking to understand the particular world (Goldbart and Hustler 2004: 16) and uncover the basis of practice of high achieving sixth form students and their experience of the Oxbridge application process. The benefits of ethnography in terms of why it was best suited to my object of study was the depth and breadth of understanding it offered (Walford 2009) as well as the multitude of data collection that was available (Gallagher and Freeman 2011) particularly when looking at lived experience. For Denscombe (2014: 90), it is this ability to take a fresh eye at everyday taken for granted behaviour that makes ethnography fit for purpose and indeed being able to utilise an approach to question the structural pre-suppositions of certain systems and sub-fields was a crucial part of my research. Therefore, in utilising an immersive approach (Bryman 2012) in which the views and members of a situation are studied, an understanding of a culture occurs. In this way I was able to learn and understand the culture of my own object of study in order to try and make sense of their lived experience.

Traditionally, ethnographies would involve some form of participant observation to generate 'thick description' (Geertz 1988) gleaned from being immersed within a particular culture to provide rich data such as those purported by the early ethnographic pioneers of The Chicago School of the early and mid-twentieth century (Bulmer 1984). However, the explosion and diversification of different branches of ethnography in the 21st century has meant that ethnography does not need to be either long-term nor just one research method (Hammersley 2018) with the use of a variety of different methods being an accepted practice (Bailey 2017). Indeed, there is now a body of evidence that ethnographies can be conducted without participant observation and can draw on ethnographic techniques when

conducting research in a familiar setting in which the researcher has an active interest (Suter 2000).

However, I was also aware that conducting an ethnography carries certain risks and weaknesses with it, not least because the researcher is the 'human instrument' (Bourke 2014: 2) who makes all the choices regarding what is and isn't included within the research and all the subjective biases that come with my own positionality (as outlined in chapter 1) and being an insider research (as will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 7). The presence of the researcher can also alter the participant's behaviour (The Hawthorne Effect) or could mean that the researcher has an overly positive (halo effect) or negative (horns effect) impression of the participant based on their initial meetings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018: 321). In addition, ethnography is almost impossible to replicate and has limited generalisability (Denscombe 2014: 91), not to mention complex ethical issues (which will be discussed later on).

Yet despite these concerns, there was still a compelling case that the depth of data generated by utilising ethnographic techniques would fully uncover the social practice of my object of study and therefore as long as I utilised the toolkit provided by Bourdieu (as outlined in chapter 3) and in particular the notion of Participant Objectivication and reflexivity (as outlined in this chapter and chapter 7), I would be able to mitigate such weaknesses to understand the lived experience of the STAR students. Moreover, it was Bourdieu's work on combating the asymmetry between the researcher and the researched by means of researcher reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and his flexibility in approach (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991) that fully justifies its applicability to my object of study, particularly as an insider researcher. Such tensions within the research process is reflected on by Bloommaert (2005: 228) as being, 'a mature position; [Bourdieu] accepts ethnography in its fullest sense, including the inevitable quagmires of subjectivity, bias and 'doing-as-if' in the field.' Therefore, in using Bourdieu's understanding of the world and the relationship between subject and object (Grenfell and James 1998: 162), I used ethnographic techniques to illuminate my scope of analysis to understand high achieving students in their own social context.

This chapter will now go into detail on the research methods and processes I employed as part of the ethnographic techniques.

Research Methods

As stated, I wanted research methods that would have maximum explanatory power in uncovering the decision-making processes of the STAR cohort and crucially, would enable my research to uncover their lived experience. As discussed in chapter 3, to be able to understand their dispositions, thoughts and feelings in their own words was paramount and so this steered the research towards employing qualitative methods (Mason 2018) in order to fully answer my research questions and understand the social practice of the STAR students. The research had a three-stage process: Firstly, I conducted a pilot study to trial a specific approach and test particular questioning and ethical procedures. Secondly, I conducted a focus group to scope out the field and assess where more detailed questioning might be needed. Finally, I conducted one-on-one interviews to gain a comprehensive insight into the STAR students' lived experience and decision-making processes. The pilot study took place in December 2019 and the main research took place from October 2020 until May 2021 as this was the natural life cycle and rhythm of a sixth form student educationally from the fresh start of the new academic year to sitting A-Level examinations in June. It also incorporated key stages of the Oxbridge application process from personal statements in September, entrance exams in October, interviews in December and final acceptance or rejection in January. Table 5 details all the participants (pseudonyms are used) of each stage of the research process: who the participants were that were involved, broken down by social characteristics (age, gender and ethnicity), home area that they lived at the time in terms of decile of multiple deprivation (as per The English Indices of Deprivation (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2019)) in which 1 is most deprived and 10 is least deprived)and the subject they were applying to study at Oxbridge.

Table 5: Table of participants (pseudonyms) at each stage of the research with social characteristics of each individual

Pilot Study Name	Age at time of interview	Year group	Self-identified Gender	Self identified ethnicity	Index of Multiple Deprivation Decile	Subject Applied to
Grace	17	A1 (1st year)	Female	White British	6	Psychology
Lilly	17	A1 (1st year)	Female	White British	9	Psychology
Jo	17	A1 (1st year)	Female	White British	8	English Literature
Jenny	17	A1 (1st year)	Female	White British	4	Psychology
Joby	17	A1 (1st year)	Male	White British	5	Medicine

Focus group Name	Age at time of interview	Year group	Self-identified Gender	Self-identified ethnicity	Index of Multiple Deprivation Decile	Subject Applied to
Wanisha	17	A2 (2nd year)	Female	Bangladeshi	2	Medicine
Lacey	18	A2 (2nd year)	Female	White British	1	Computer Science
Madalene	18	A2 (2nd year)	Female	Black African	1	Medicine
Hadija	17	A2 (2nd year)	Female	Bangladeshi	2	Chemical Engineering
Jack	18	A2 (2nd year)	Male	White British	8	Chemistry
Jez	18	A2 (2nd year)	Male	Asian	4	Computer Science
Joby	18	A2 (2nd year)	Male	White British	5	Medicine

Interview Name	Age at time of interview	Year group or year left	Self-identified Gender	Self identified ethnicity	Index of Multiple Deprivation Decile	Subject Applied to
Wanisha	17	A2 (2nd year)	Female	Bangladeshi	2	Medicine
Lacey	18	A2 (2nd year)	Female	White British	1	Computer Science
Vidal	18	A2 (2nd year)	Male	White British	3	Engineering
Allana	17	A2 (2nd year)	Female	Asian	1	Medicine
Aaliya	17	A2 (2nd year)	Female	Pakistani	1	Chemical Engineering
Helen	16	A1(1st year)	Female	Asian	5	Maths
Charlene	21	2017	Female	White British	8	Psychology
Eddie	20	2019	Male	White British	4	Biology
Vance	21	2019	Male	White British	3	Medicine
Jo	18	2020	Female	White British	8	English Literature
Cacey	21	2017	Female	White British	7	Chemistry
Darren	20	2018	Male	White British	1	Chemistry

Pilot Study

Before carrying my main research, I conducted a pilot study to help shape my research design and clarify certain techniques. Described as a 'practice run' (Clark et al 2021: 433), the pilot study enabled me to refine my methods (Lavrakas 2008) so as to trial the efficacy of an ethnographic method and also gauge how issues of power, positionality and reflexivity could be reconciled as an insider researcher via means of an ethical framework. I conducted a focus group (see following detailed discussion) with five STAR students and transcribed the data before detailing my initial findings about the research process (Windle 2020). The pilot study gave me an insight that qualitative methods would be effective and also gave me the opportunity to trial an interview schedule – this was subsequently adapted through

various iterations to be used for the main study (appendix 5 and 6). The pilot study also gave me the opportunity to refine my ethical procedures so that they conform to a professional body standard (British Educational Research Association 2018) – see below for more on this. In addition, I learnt about how to organise and code my data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) and the transcription and data analysis process is discussed towards the end of this chapter. Above all, the pilot study helped me realise how my research questions could be fully addressed and how I could understand the social practice of the STAR students.

Focus groups

Following the pilot study, I conducted a focus group with seven high achieving students from the STAR Cohort as a way to scope out the potential field and assess the possibility of further questions during one-to-one interviews. Defined by Beck, Trombetta and Share (1986: 73) as 'an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics relevant to the situation at hand', the focus group enables a range of opinions to be expressed around a single topic (Krueger 1986:1) and the ability to achieve this in a short space of time (Barbour and KItzinger 1999:4) (See Fern (2001) for an extensive review of the focus group literature). For their detractors, they can be a contrived get-together in which one person dominates, yielding a poor standard of data (Smithson 2000). However, if one considers carefully key issues such as power, trust, social position and interpretation (Barbour and Schostac 2004:43) then meaningful data can be achieved. The sample for the focus group was selected by non-probability volunteer sampling (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2017: 222) with the whole STAR Cohort student population being offered the opportunity to be part of the focus group as part of an opt-in strategy. This was the most appropriate sampling technique as members of the focus group needed to be chosen on the basis of a predetermined characteristic that they were members of the STAR cohort (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub 1996: 58). An initial expression of interest was asked for within STAR tutorials and subsequently an information sheet (Appendix 2) and participant consent form (Appendix 3) was

given with participants fully informed about the nature and intent of the focus group as well as their right to withdraw. I explained within these documents that the purpose of my research was to find out their thoughts and feelings on belonging to the STAR cohort and to understand their experience of going through the Oxbridge application process. Although not strictly necessary (this is discussed further in ethical considerations below), parental consent was also sought (Appendix 4). Full consent was also agreed with the Principal of the college. The data generated by the focus group was recorded and stored on the university Q drive in compliance with my data management plan (Appendix 5) as part of my ethics application. Safeguarding policy was adhered to in line with the college safeguarding policy and as a teacher at the college I was already DBS checked to work with young adults.

It was intended that the benefits of the focus group to the students would be that they would get the opportunity to tell their story of their own lived experience of being a high achieving sixth former and could contribute to further academic knowledge of this object of study, ultimately supporting developments in this academic area. Potentially I envisaged the greatest risk to be the power imbalance (Coghlan and Brannick 2014) of researching students who not only I had some responsibility for but also who potentially could have their own interests such as wanting to please me by being a part of the focus group or even using the focus group as an opportunity to gain access to more of my time. Therefore, to minimise this I made sure I explicitly detailed how students would not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way at the recruitment stage and before the start of the focus group. I also made sure that students were invited to volunteer of their own accord and that issues of consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity were fully addressed as well as the right to withdraw. In addition, students would lose some free time so I arranged the focus group to take place at lunchtime in college to minimise this inconvenience.

In preparation for the focus group I developed a question guide (Davidson, Halcomb and Gholizadeh 2010) based on my main study aims and what I wanted to achieve with the focus group (see Appendix 6). In addition, it was crucial that I used probes

and prompts in order to follow up points raised by participants (Conradson 2005). As the moderator it was also necessary to have a clear set of opening remarks such as introductions, reminders of confidentiality and consent as well as presenting the opportunity to leave the study (Vaughn et al 1996: 80). I therefore endeavoured to moderate in a way that struck a balance between having control and letting the focus group flow (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011) in order to try and achieve the best outcomes for my research. The ultimate aim of the focus group was to scope out the terrain of my object of study in order to create a detailed interview schedule for the subsequent interviews.

Interviews

Secondly, I conducted twelve interviews: these were six interviews with former STAR students who had subsequently left and gone to university and six with current STAR students who were in the process of applying to university. Two of the participants who were part of the focus group and one who was part of the pilot study were interviewed as part of this group. Using the focus group data, a comprehensive set of question areas was formulated that would fully address my research questions (Appendix 7). In addition, by using both current and former STAR students, the intention was to try and gain a full understanding of the lived experience from both students currently experiencing the process and from students looking back and reflecting (these responses were aggregated around each research question in chapters 5 and 6). The sampling continued to be volunteer sampling along the same lines as the focus group sampling, however, the sample size was smaller for former students due to the lack of contact details. Seen by Kvale (1996: 14) as an 'interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest', the interviews were semi-structured using an interview guide (Patton 1980: 206) (appendix 7). The use of a semi-structured format enabled some forethought to be used in terms of considering topics and issues to be covered but also gave enough flexibility should a topic that required further investigation come up in conversation. For Woods (1986), the ethnographer as interviewer should

strive for the attributes of trust, curiosity and naturalness when conducting interviews within one's own field and indeed, being part of the research field I was studying, did make the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee extremely crucial (the importance and ethics of which will be discussed underneath). However, Basset, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic and Chapman (2008: 119) note that 'encouraging a teenager to have a conversation in a semi-structured research interview is fraught with difficulties' and in this respect, knowing and working alongside the individuals that I was researching did help in building an effective rapport with the object of study.

The interviews were conducted within the sixth form college or via online video call and were recorded and stored in compliance with my data management plan (appendix 5). Similar to the focus groups, all participants were briefed with an information sheet and gave their written consent with parental consent also given from the students who were still part of the college. As will be discussed, insider research and reflexivity were at the forefront of this study and so I was positioned first and foremost as the students' pastoral tutor and as a researcher second. For my own reflexive purpose and being mindful of my own sense-making, a field diary was kept during the research (appendix 8). Finally, of paramount importance, the students involved in the study were positioned as students first and participants second and therefore it was made clear to them in the information sheet and verbally, that their welfare and college experience came before being the subject of research.

Ethical considerations

Ethics in research are a code of practice to which the researcher must take informed decisions on how to operate within their research based on key principles such as beneficence, non-malfeasance, integrity, informed Consent, confidentiality/anonymity and impartiality (SHU 2017). As a researcher and Doctoral student, I used the professional guidelines provided by my own university (SHU 2017) and the overarching framework provided by the professional body within

which my research sits (BERA 2018) as a starting point and benchmark for my ethical compass.

As previously mentioned, the most important ethical issue raised by my pilot study and what was paramount in my main study was the power dimension within the research context and the notion of being an 'insider research' i.e. conducting research within a research setting that I was already part of and connected to (Coghlan and Brannick 2014). In this respect I was conducting research with students who were under my care and who I was heavily involved with, in helping and guiding their decision making. Furthermore, (as explained in chapter 1 in terms of my role), I was researching the lived experience of the very same students who I tutored and was ultimately writing Oxbridge and university references for and in some respects, my own career success depended on how well the students fared in such endeavours. Therefore, it was clear that in such a particular educational setting, dealing with the students could be very sensitive research (Noffke 2009) where it could be difficult to build trust and negotiate the power imbalances (Healey 2017). Indeed, Venkatesh (2016:4) has argued that this potential unequal power relationship can seriously undermine the validity of ethnographic research, and this was an issue I needed to avoid. Moreover, it was clear that I would need to not only address the power issues with the students but also inwardly reflect on my own role within the object of study and how my own social practice affected the dispositions of the students involved.

I therefore followed my own university Insider Research Guidelines and the advice for the need of 'sensitivities' in relation to the power dimension between the researcher and the participants and in particular to issues of consent and refusal to participate (SHU 2018). Part of the strategy to overcome this issue was through the universities own systems of dialogue via the Ethics committee and conversations with my supervisory team. Indeed, this is reflected in my considerations regarding student refusal to participate and day to day interactions with the STAR students in that it was imperative that students who did not take part were given reassurance and treated fairly. Likewise, the students that did participate were also clear that

they would not be advantaged in any way. Central to this was making sure (as per university guidance) that the benefits and risks were never just self-evident and were always explicitly stated through published information and verbal discussion. Therefore, to minimise this I made sure that students were invited to volunteer of their own accord and that issues of consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity were fully addressed as well as the right to withdraw. Additionally, I was very mindful in engaging with the research in a delicate manner and recognising the need to be reflexive and to critically analyse my position (see chapter 1 on positionality and chapter 7 on reflexivity and participant objectivication). Moreover, it was a case of going beyond setting out my position and considering myself 'critically neutral' (Dean 2017: 8) to an active vigilance against a skewed power imbalance (Bourdieu 1999). In being reflexive, it was about giving the appropriate time and space to fully address my researcher positionality and ethical considerations as an on-going process throughout the research process. As Goldbart and Hustler (2004: 18) reflect that once the researcher accepts that they are a key part of the data collection in obtaining the research then at times there can be no solution or resolution to such issues, rather a recognition. In the case of my research, it was applying the Bourdieusian toolkit and level of analysis to not only my object of study but also to myself through the process of Participant Objectivication (as outlined in chapter 3) to explicitly tackle these tensions. Thus, Chapter 7 explicitly addresses these key risks to the research where I am a significant feature of the research and how these were ameliorated.

The second ethical issue that was highlighted by the pilot study was the 'grey area' in the nature of informed consent, particularly as my focus group and interviews involved some sixth form college-age students aged 16-18 years old of whom I had a duty of care to as their tutor and thus acting in loco parentis. Indeed, the issue of what constitutes necessary consent for 16-18-year olds is a difficult topic to get a clear position on. My own university acknowledges that anyone under the age of 18 in full time education is considered a 'vulnerable individual' (SHU 2015) but also recognises that if the school is fully satisfied and the Headteacher has given consent then parental consent is not needed and that the researcher should be 'guided by

the school' (SHU 2016). Similarly, the BERA (2018) guidelines do not specifically draw attention to this explicit area of young people and The National Children's Bureau only advise parental consent for over 16s in exceptional circumstances such as conducting an interview in the family home or if they have a learning disability (Shaw, Brady and Davy 2011: 29). The ethical decision at stake here was the balance between respecting student autonomy but also acknowledging parental responsibility (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson and Fitzgerald 2013: 59). Although, the Head of Safeguarding within the college was satisfied that only student consent was needed, I still opted for a 'belt and braces' approach and sought parental consent also, just to be fully satisfied that all issues surrounding consent had been dealt with.

The final ethical issue was one of 'using' students in order to complete my research (Wolcott 1995: 140). This is often mitigated by the notion that the benefits of social justice research for the participants are that they will have a voice and 'feel empowered', yet this can at times be patronising, convenient, or an over-simplification. Dewar (1991:75) sums this up when she writes:

> 'Notions of power and privilege must be addressed in order to understand what it means to 'have a voice'... the issue is not who has a voice; we all have voices and speak with them in very different ways. The problem arises when we define our strategy against oppression as one that enables us to 'give' certain groups of people a voice. What does it mean to give? What kinds of relationships does this imply? What kind of power and privilege is implied in the act of giving? What does this say about how voices are heard and interpreted.'

Being aware of this and understanding the multi-faceted dynamics at play certainly helps in overcoming such an issue but is it ever possible to be free from this tension? Moreover, would it be more beneficial to not conduct research, to not give a voice or to not pursue social justice research? Although to not conduct research would be an extreme response and possibly an over-reaction, the issue of voice and the privilege of being allowed to use it is worth considering. Therefore, in being reflexive, having a constant awareness of positionality and understanding my own actions and how they were perceived, it was hoped such a negative understanding

of 'using' a participant could be 'minimised'. In particular, I wanted to conduct my research on my object of study as I had identified a problem space which was under-researched and wanted to understand the social practice. Ultimately, I assured the participants that they would come to no harm and that the research was examining the underlying basis of practice and not evaluating them. Moreover, on a wider point, Goodman (1998) points out that the contradictions and unresolved ideologies that we carry in to research on a day to day basis and the ambiguity this presents is a part of being a researcher. Thus, in undertaking a Bourdieusian methodology that was reflexive and having the sufficient tools to consider the pre-constructions within the research process, I was satisfied that the necessary steps and precautions were in place to make my research ethically sound and viable.

Having therefore looked at the major ethical issues surrounding the research, the final sections of this chapter addresses the transcription and data analysis.

Transcription

As stated previously, all the interviews and focus groups were recorded and were subsequently all transcribed by myself. Nelson (1996: 12) highlights how the act of transcribing is often over-looked in social research as a 'minor-concern' when in fact many choices are made in the way speech is represented before analysis. Indeed, it could be argued from a Bourdieusian perspective that this was a further element to Participant Objectivication and another constituent in which I could demonstrate reflexivity through accurate transcription. Despite the many different ways and techniques that could be used for transcription (Edwards and Lampert 1993), I opted for an orthographic (sometimes called verbatim) style of transcription (Clarke and Braun 2013: 162) to provide as accurate a representation of the interviews and focus groups as possible. In this form of transcription, I literally wrote down all the verbal utterances by the participants. This acknowledges the 'messiness' of speech – such as the pauses, the coughs and the unfinished sentences – but also provides a richer data source because of its accuracy from which analysis can take place. As

part of this I adhered to a transcription notation system (Jefferson 2004) which can be used to help make sense of the transcription in the findings chapters. Table 6 illustrates my notation system and method of transcribing.

Table 6: Transcription Notation system (adapted from Jefferson 2004)

Feature	Notation and explanation of use
Identity of the speaker	The speaker's name will always precede any speech in brackets e.g. [Charlene]
Pauses or hesitations	Represented by … . This sometimes is evident when a speaker changes their mind about what to say mid-sentence
Laughing, coughing, crying etc	[laughs] signals the action that the speaker is doing whilst talking or during a break in talk
Cut off speech	This is when the text reports words or sounds that the speaker has uttered such as beginning a word but not finishing it. E.g 'wa' when they were going to say 'was' but never finished
Reported speech	When the speaker is mimicking or reporting back what someone else has said. This is indicated though double quotation marks e.g. 'so she said "that is well out of order".'
Accents and vernacular usage	This is when very obvious accents or vernacular usage are translated as they are spoken, e.g. the use of 'coz' meaning 'because' or how some speakers use the word 'like' to punctuate or breathe whilst talking.

Data analysis - Thematic Analysis

The transcripts were analysed using theoretical thematic analysis (see appendix 9 for a sample of coding) which is part of the overall approach of thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis as a named approach was first developed by Holton in the 1970s (Merton 1975) but has only relatively recently been seen as a distinct method in its own right with a much cited and very influential paper by Braun and Clarke (2006). Frustrated by a lack of clearly outlined procedures that were 'poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used,' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 77), Clarke and Braun (2013: 178) 'named and claimed' Thematic Analysis as a systematic approach for identifying, analysing and reporting themes across a set of data. Whilst other

authors were writing around the topic of Thematic Analysis (such as Boyatzis 1998, Patton 1990, King 1998), there was little coherence or an incompatibility with theory. Unique to Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach was the idea that it was 'just a method' of data analysis with no prescription of data collection or theoretical method and thus flexible to the point where, 'It can be used to answer almost any research question and used to analyse almost any kind of data' (Clarke and Braun 2013: 178). Whilst the authors acknowledge that this could also be considered a weakness and opens themselves up to the 'anything goes' critique (Clarke and Braun 2013: 179), they hoped that by having a very clear set of guidelines paired with an absence of theoretical constraint then a balance could be struck and the usefulness of their method of data analysis could be maximized.

In producing a step-by step guide (summed up in Table 7), Braun and Clarke (2006) aimed to make the process easy and accessible seeing analysis as a recursive process where movement between the phases goes back and forth (Braun and Clarke 2006:86).

Table 7: Phases of thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006: 87)

Phases	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. The final opportunity for analysis.
6. Producing the report:	Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Fundamental to their approach is the coding element surrounding what constitutes a theme. Typically, Braun and Clarke articulate flexibility in this area also arguing

that there is no hard and fast rule and that ultimately it is a matter of researcher judgment:

> 'This is a question of prevalence, in terms both of space within each data item and of prevalence across the entire data set. Ideally, there will be a number of instances of the theme across the data set, but more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial.'

(Braun and Clarke 2006:82)

Therefore, they argue that themes are not waiting to be discovered like diamonds but are a product of decision making and choices actively made by the researcher. Using the analogy of baking, Braun and Clarke (2016: 740) stated in a wide-ranging rebuke of how some researchers were mis-using Thematic Analysis that it should be a process whereby,

> 'A whole combination of materials (ingredients), processes and skills combine to produce a cake. Before baking, the cake isn't waiting to be 'revealed' – it comes into being through activity and engagement, within set parameters.'

Yet it is perhaps a lack of set parameters because of the immense flexibility that creates elements of inconsistency and incoherence that is the biggest criticism leveled at Thematic Analysis (Holloway and Todres 2003). However, this was a limitation that was noted by Braun and Clarke in their original paper and in keeping the method as flexible as possible they intended to offer 'an adventure, not a recipe' (Braun and Clarke 2019:592) and thus it is up to the researcher to decide how they are theoretically informed and exactly how they will enact Thematic Analysis.

In this respect, employing theoretical thematic analysis does provide some structure with it being described as a process whereby 'analysis is guided by an existing theory and theoretical concepts (as well as by the researcher's standpoint, disciplinary knowledge and epistemology' (Braun and Clarke 2013: 175). Moreover, theoretical thematic analysis does mesh very neatly with Bourdieu's toolkit because fundamental to all is reflexivity in how to thoughtfully and reflectively engage both with the analytic process and the object of study and this will go some way to addressing the issue of thematic construction as an interpretative act.

I therefore undertook theoretical thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six steps, having the specific field analysis in mind as outlined by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104-7) and also the Bourdieusian conceptual tool box that was available to me. This involved various thematic maps and iterations of codes and themes that was initially trialled in the pilot study (Windle 2020). In generating themes, I wanted to understand the social practice of the high achieving STAR students to satisfy my research questions and therefore used the key Bourdieusian concepts of field, capital and habitus (as outlined in chapter 3) as starting points for analysis and to find how these concepts intersected. In addition, I also used Participant Objectivication as a separate theme to underscore my own role in researching the object of study and to bring my own reflexivity to the fore as an insider researcher. Table 8 represents the final thematic map that was used to analyse the findings with clusters of quotes assigned to particular sub-themes. These themes and sub-themes were subsequently analysed and edited for publication in the following two findings and discussion chapters with Appendix 9 detailing an example for each one of the codes.

Table 8: Main themes and sub-themes

Main Theme	Level 1 sub theme	Level 2 sub theme
Habitus	Being different	social class gender Place/Field Fit fitting in ethnicity peer group
	Being STAR/High achieving	rules of the game misrecognition Conatus: Acceptance of Fate Positive experience Work ethic Measuring success Compare with others/competition
	Emotions	confidence/self belief Fears/Negative self esteem Pressure
Capitals	cultural capital	
	economic capital/money	
	social capital	
Fields	Lockdown	lockdown hysteresis

		lockdown habitus lockdown cultural capital lockdown economic capital
	College/School	teachers influence/support Most Able strategy
	Home	family
	Oxbridge	fairness of admissions Doxa: Myth of oxbridge Oxbridge application/exam Oxbridge interview Oxbridge WP rejection
Participant objectivication		

This chapter has set out the methodology and research design for this thesis from ontology and epistemology through to the research methods utilised and addressing ethical issues. The next chapter will now outline the initial findings of the focus group and address the first research question.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion - The lived experience of a high achieving sixth form student

Having set out my approach to research, the next two chapters are organised around answering the three respective research questions regarding my object of study.

As has been outlined, an initial focus group was first carried out to scope out the terrain of questioning for further interviews surrounding my three research questions of the lived experience of high achieving STAR students, the Oxbridge application system and the decision-making process. The focus group built upon my pilot study in clarifying my research questions so that I would have a question guide (appendix 6) in order to understand the social practice of the STAR students. As discussed in chapter 4, the focus group consisted of seven STAR students and this was an opportunity to gain a preliminary overview of their experiences from their perspective which could then be followed up in greater depth during the interviews.

The questions were generated around three key themes:

- The experience of being high achieving – this asked questions such as how the students were identified and what it meant to them to be considered as high achieving
- The day to day life of being a STAR student – this asked questions such as how they saw themselves and others in the sixth form college and how their experience related to other social and cultural factors
- The experience of Oxbridge – this asked questions on how they found each stage of the process and what had influenced them.

Appendix 6 details the questions used during the focus group as original prompts but there was also an element of flexibility during the responses to the questions whereby different students articulated what they felt about a particular issue that may have been slightly off-topic from the original question. Following the focus group, the interview schedule was further developed (appendix 7) to allow for greater depth and validity to fully answer my research questions during the interviews.

In order to create some coherence around each research question this chapter will address the first research question and detail the initial results from the focus group before demonstrating how this was developed in the interviews. The first research question aimed to understand the social practice of the STAR students:

- What are the students' lived experiences of being identified as a high achieving Sixth Form Student?

This question wanted to understand from a student perspective their own perceptions of the social world they inhabited and how they felt in different spaces and contexts being a high achieving student.

Focus group initial results

From the outset there was much agreement that the overwhelming experience of being high achieving was one of pressure and the expectations surrounding this. Different students all shared their experiences of expectations from both the sixth form college and at home because they were perceived as high achieving. This was encapsulated by Hadija to the question on what was it like being high achieving in college:

> [Hadija] 'I feel like teachers expect us to be smarter so when they explain things to us, they just assume you'll get it.'

Indeed, the notion of this over-riding and constant pressure to achieve was a fundamental experience in the focus group and one that I would explore further and deeper in the interviews. It also became apparent what being high achieving meant and how this was defined for the students themselves. For the majority of the group, they felt that being high achieving and part of the STAR cohort was synonymous and for some, gaining entry to the STAR programme was the first outward symbol that they were 'smart'. One student felt that being on the programme was a source of great pride and was a 'badge'. Others also acknowledged how they had worked harder at their GCSEs in order to gain entry on to the programme and this notion of how they understood the programme and what this did to their motivation was something I would explore later on. Similar to

Neihart et al (2016), the majority of the group found that the STAR programme introduced them to 'like minded people' that they found positive. Some mentioned how they hid their success or failure from non-STAR students and therefore said that having people in the STAR cohort who knew what they were going through was a source of support. However, because of the open forum dynamic of a focus group of peers this wasn't explored in full and it was interesting to explore this further, particularly some of the negative aspects of the programme, in the one on one interviews. Finally, a number of students highlighted the difficulties that lockdown posed in terms of learning and this clearly was a major issue that needed to be delved deeper into and would a form a separate section of questioning in the interviews.

The focus group proved to be a vital part of the research process and gave me a stimulating overview of my object of study. In particular, the focus group highlighted the pressure felt by high achieving students in order to achieve and how this was experienced in college, home and online. The influence of the STAR programme was highlighted in terms of what it meant for them and the benefits it gave them such as friendship. The focus group also showed student experience of some elements of the Oxbridge application process and their initial understandings in terms of what they needed to do to be successful and how fair it was (this will be discussed further in the next chapter). These findings contributed to the subsequent creation of an interview schedule (Appendix 7) which would be used for each of the interviews to probe deeper into the issues raised within the focus group.

Interviews

As outlined in chapter 4, twelve interviews were conducted with current (at the time in 2020/21) and past STAR students. Building on the focus group prompts (appendix 6), an interview schedule was developed (appendix 7) that would give me sufficient latitude to address my research questions and gain an insight into the lived experience of the STAR students. From the focus group, I was satisfied that the three areas of questioning regarding student experience, day-to-day life and

Oxbridge worked well. However, some themes emerged from the focus group which clarified the particular line and depth of questioning that I would take and meant that I added a new section of questioning. In particular, it became clear from the focus group that student experience was located in three main spaces, namely the Sixth form college, home and surprisingly, the online world during lockdown. This shaped my questioning to explore their dispositions in these three main spaces. This meant being specific in terms of questioning how they felt about being high achieving in particular areas and groups e.g. in the classroom, at home, with friends or with family, how they felt they were perceived. Moreover, I added a new section of questioning solely around the experience of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus group clarified that this was a major experience for the students and so I specifically asked about how that experience was, how their learning was online and the implications of this for a high achieving student.

The findings and discussion for this chapter are therefore based around answering the first research question regarding the lived experience of being a high achieving student. From the focus group and interviews it was very evident that this revolved around three sites of experience, college, home and online and so the findings for this research question are organised around these three spaces. Following this, a discussion takes place in which the findings are subjected to theorisation using the Bourdieusian toolkit outlined in chapter 3.

The experience of being high achieving at Sixth Form college

For some of the participants, 'knowing' that they were high achieving happened from an early age (mostly at primary school) and often coincided with their own recognition that a specific intervention was taking place within the school to cater for their needs. This ranged from the hiring of special tutor; to being placed on the 'top table'; to being entered for an extra SAT exam in year 6. Indeed, being put in for an extra exam or subject was not an uncommon strategy by a school – this could be seen in undertaking extra GCSEs in further maths or statistics for example. For

Aaliyah, this was an important factor when deciding on her choice of sixth form college when asked about how she became a STAR student:

> [Aaliyah] 'I came to Northwest Sixth Form college coz It was close. We looked at other ones and this one was far the best. It also gave me the opportunity to take four subjects rather than just three because in year 11 I was really on the fence about whether chemical engineering for university or computer science.'

A few students felt they were identified as high achieving quite 'late' and were not 'picked up' until after their GCSE results came out when they were starting sixth form college (Carman 2013). For Jo, it was this lack of exposure and lack of identification that she felt put her at a disadvantage when asked about her experience of becoming a STAR student:

> [Jo] 'Like they started doing like Oxford things then…or just like uni things in general [at school] and I wasn't like invited to any of those sort of things so I didn't really have any sort of like understanding of university, especially not like Oxbridge…. Until I came to 6th form coz my parents didn't go to uni either. So yeah, I was sort of just like…. Like you know, fending for myself…'

For all of the participants, gaining a place on the STAR programme was a key signifier in being able to see themselves as high achieving. For many, the prevailing culture of the STAR programme at Northwest Sixth Form College was signalled from when they began to consider their post-16 options a year prior to starting college in year 11 and sometimes even earlier. As detailed in chapter 1, this was communicated through the college website, separate entrance interviews, open days and events, school visits and above all the entry requirements needed to gain entry on the programme. For the students, to reach the threshold of the required seven grade 7s at GCSE was seen as an outward validation that they were officially 'clever' and a belief that this would give them access to a STAR student only tutorial programme and a bespoke suite of opportunities and skills development. The intentions of the STAR programme and the messaging by myself as STAR Manager - the emphasis on high grades, the constant drip feeding of elite universities and high career aspirations as well as the prominence on being academic – had a profound effect on the participants. Roughly only 150 students met the entry criteria when they applied to the sixth form college (out of a college of 2500 students) and so just

the act of being on the programme had an impact on their day to day experience. This was exemplified by Vance when he was asked what it felt like to be a high achieving STAR student:

> [Vance] 'It is only when I got to college and the STAR programme said "this is a group of gifted and talented students, you will be treated differently and special now. You're in a STAR form" and I thought "oh, awesome." I guess to me it kind of meant that people would be watching because I was expected to do well…and so I think that that kind of [gave me] a drive to do better…'

> [Damian] 'And so did that change anything? How does that affect your day to day behaviour?'

> [Vance] 'I guess it meant I tried to pull my finger out a little bit more just in case something went wrong, so I had to be ready because you know you've been allocated to this group because of your past achievements in preparation for the achievements that you will then have. So you gotta try and live up to that.'

Of particular surprise was the taken-for-granted assumption that the threshold for defining 'high achievement' of seven 7s at GCSE for the STAR programme was never questioned by students or parents and there was an acceptance of where the line was in terms of 'being in or being out'. From my own research diary, there were a number of instances where parents and students argued individual circumstances as to why the entrance criteria should be lowered perhaps relating to a language GCSE taken in year 9 or a long term illness during a child's schooling and it is noticeable that being part of STAR cohort was something that was desired as it conveyed the prospect of a better future. Indeed, participants felt that just knowing they were on the STAR programme before they had even started Sixth Form raised their aspirations in terms of what they might achieve and the prospect of attending an elite university:

> [Helen] 'I think that being a part of the STAR course has definitely made [Oxbridge] feel more accessible, whereas before I thought that it was just some really… really good university that you know a lot of…private school kids… or people …that have had higher advantages in their education would go to, but I think being part of this course has really made it feel more accessible.'

Once part of the STAR programme, students spend at least an hour a week in an STAR tutorial group with other STAR students (normally a class of around 25 students) with a dedicated STAR tutor as well as receiving day to day pastoral advice and guidance when it is needed (this could range from specific personal support such as a family bereavement to educational help with a particular subject or advice on university application). Vidal highlighted earlier the sense of being treated 'different' and this was a dominant feeling experienced by the other participants. Of particular note was the role the STAR programme played in highlighting and then promoting this difference (Cross et al 2003) through the programme itself. Indeed, this was surprising and generated an inward look at the STAR programme as up until this point, I had not considered the STAR programme creating a negative division. For some, it created unnecessary expectations because of the perceived intelligence associated with being on the STAR programme and that there was an assumption that they were 'smart' and weren't expected to struggle. For others, this created some conflict with non-STAR friends who saw it as 'elitist' and led to similar coping strategies as seen in the study by Peterson and Ray (2006). Indeed, Charlene was asked how she acted around her (non-STAR) friends:

> [Charlene] 'I think I toned it down a lot around them [peers] because they might say - especially during the application process.... For example, I think those in STAR and applying to Oxbridge would get a lot more attention. They'd [apply to university] earlier. I remember people finding that annoying if they knew so I just kind of like "yeah it's not fair". Even though I knew that like you can't do it for everyone. Coz I'd just feel a bit...I'd want to be more like them I think...So I would just kind of, yeah, tone it down a lot. I think so I didn't want to be perceived as different.'

In 'toning down' Charlene was profoundly forming her identity around trying to fit in and not be perceived as different. Indeed, as evident in the academic literature (Cross et al 2015), the experience of high achieving students was one of difference and for many of the participants this was the difference of what was expected of them compared to their peers (Gaither 2008). Wanisha achieved all 9s and one 8 at GCSE and this felt like a key demarcation for her. When asked about how her day-to-day experience with her friends, she responded:

> [Wanisha] 'It's so complex? Is so nice like it's nice when people like [say], "oh you're really bright" and I'm like "thank you" but then I think there's a lot of times I... like people know my grades before like they know my name...'

Thus, for Wanisha, and many of the other participants, a key part of their experience on a day to day basis was coping with pressure to perform at the highest level and the expectation of that. This was evident in Aaliyah's response when she was asked about how it felt to be high achieving in the classroom:

> [Aaliyah] 'I kick myself when I get a C. I really hate that. I really beat on myself. If I gotta D I don't know... I cried when I got a C in my Physics.'

Central to this was what the STAR students perceived as important to them - for many, they did comprehend the long term project of what high grades could bring, such as a place at a good university or secure good employment, but also grades in and of themselves became a source of obsession that to entertain anything less than an A was treated with disdain and a major source of reproach. For the high achieving participants, there was a sense of being on a treadmill of grade comparisons, beginning with their SATs in year 9 before moving on to GCSEs and then A-levels. This was similar to Stubbs and Murphy (2020) in the notion that it wasn't until national assessments that the high achieving students really started to benchmark themselves. For Helen, it was about competition with herself when asked what her experience of being high achieving was like:

> [Helen] 'It's more like competing with myself rather than competing with peers and friends to try and get better and better. And then from there it's like competing nationally to try and go to those top universities and be in that top percentage of people that get the good grades.....yeah, competing in almost everything I want coz in exams only a certain percentage of people can get the top grades no matter how well everyone does nationally, there's only gonna be that top percent. And I want to be in that top percent. So I do feel like I'm competing to get to that level. I think it created a kind of standard that I wanted to maintain. But yeah, because once you get. Labelled as like a high achiever. You want to keep at that standard and challenge yourself...'

Indeed, the picture of life that the interviews built up for the STAR students was the relentless focus on grades. They described experiences of hard choices – deciding whether to give up playing the piano to make more time for revision; giving up part

time jobs to focus on academic studies; choosing not to attend college revision session as they could get more done at home; or using entire college holidays to complete every past exam paper available for their subjects. Thus, the experience for the high achieving STAR students was one of 'always something to do' with an attitude of stress tempered with a belief that they 'just have to keep going.'

If this was their main focus and key experience of Sixth form college life – what happened when it didn't go fully to plan? For many of the students the shock of not achieving a high grade or a goal associated with the grade was quite mortifying and so there was often a period of modification, re-adjusting – a sense of re-calibrating their goal and trying to rationalise and explain what had happened. One participant, Wanisha, demonstrated this strategy in the way she distanced herself from the disappointment of rejection for medical school from a particular university when she explained that it didn't matter because the distance of the university was 'too far anyway'. For many of the high achieving students, such was the ingrained desire to achieve high grades or goals, that when obstacles appeared on their journey, although disappointed, they swiftly moved on, absorbing and adjusting their identity to fit their overall purpose. This was dramatically shown when one student received rejections for veterinary medicine from all his university choices but after some soul searching, still carried on in his pursuit of high grades, achieving three grade As at A-Level and was successful in gaining a place at university for veterinary medicine the following year. It therefore seemed that the core identity for the high achieving students was one of high achievement in the form of high grades.

Finally, for many of the participants and similar to Shore et al (2018) the notion of friendships was pivotal in supporting their identity formation and it was noticeable from the participants that there was significant enjoyment and appreciation of being able to share experiences with people of similar academic ability:

> [Cacey] 'Yeah, definitely, it's just nice to be like with like-minded people… Just that you're on the same path. That you're all…. Yeah, like these type of unis that we want to go to like you can discuss that with one another…It was nice just to be in a separate form [tutorial group], so when it came to like… applying to Oxbridge then it's just that bit different. Like your [personal] statement [for UCAS] has to be so much better…'

For an overwhelming majority of the students, the STAR programme gave them a chance to develop meaningful peer relations with other high achieving students. Of note here was the considerable joy and also relief at being able to occupy the same position with other people. For the majority of the participants, being considered high achieving had not been an entirely pleasant or easy experience at their high school due to aspects such as bullying or feelings of isolation (Moulton et al. 1998). Therefore, to meet and also form friendships with people of similar academic ability was most welcome. However, a key dynamic of these friendships was competition, and this played a significant role in their identity development. Many of the participants spoke of the comparisons they made between themselves and other STAR students when asked about how they felt to be high achieving with their peers and they spoke about how this impacted both positively and negatively upon themselves:

> [Darren] 'I guess you're all going for A*s in all your subjects and applying to Oxford and Cambridge so there kind of was pressure in a way in that we almost like to kind of compete. But it wasn't so much to compete as to push ourselves to be as good as each other. It was a good environment where we could kind of push each other and that sort of stuff.'

> [Charlene] 'When the bubble you surround yourself with is more high achieving… you're just always comparing yourself and therefore you're always inferior because you can look at someone else and you're obviously seeing someone is better than they are… I think it just led to even more of an impostor syndrome. I guess that I never felt what I looked like and I still don't. It never feels quite right and I'm very aware of how I look to other people and that that's not how I feel to other people at all.'

Yet, despite some of the pressures of maintaining high grades and performing at the highest level, most of the students acknowledged how being high achieving was ultimately a positive experience. This was exemplified by Wanisha when asked about her experience of being high achieving:

> [Wanisha] 'I would never change it like ever I would never - it sounds so cocky but I don't wanna be like that student that gets like grade 3s… I like it when people come up to me in classes and they're like "how do you revise? You do so well"…'

Thus, the experience within the sixth form college for a high achieving sixth form student was one of a relentless focus on grades and achievement. It was marked by being different and this was often kick started and influenced by the institution (Northwest Sixth Form College) in classifying the student into a different cohort. On the whole the STAR participants found this experience to be positive but also highly competitive and experienced identity shifts and adaptations because of this experience.

Having therefore looked at the high achieving experience within the location of the college, the findings will now be shown regarding the experience of STAR students in their own homes.

The high achieving sixth form student experience at home

One of the set of questions I asked during the interviews was regarding the participants experience at home and how it felt being a high achieving student in this environment. For all of the STAR students, there was a sense that the experience of being high achieving at home was the same as college, in particular in terms of expectations and pressure - the big difference was the level of support and understanding they received at home. This was most apparent for Allana whose family were refugees and had only comparatively recently arrived in the UK. This created more pressure for her as she felt she had to please them as they had overcome so much to try and give her a better life:

> [Allana] 'I guess it's about not wanting to disappoint them. Because obviously they worked very hard. [voice breaks into tears] Yeah, I want to do well for myself as well obviously, but they have done so much for me, so I don't want to disappoint them.'

Indeed, the difference in parental support at home for the participants was a contrasting and variable factor (Haberlin 2018) with some feeling very supported, and others less so. When asked about his experience of being high achieving in his home, Vance spoke about how his parents took a hands-on approach to his

academic studies to the point of instilling in him to not only do the bare minimum for his homework or physically showing him how to revise:

> [Vance] 'Well originally kind of GCSE time, was the first time I had to properly prepare myself to know everything. So I didn't know how to do that. I was waddling about making mind maps and all kinds of rubbish and so mum sat down with me and made like a list of what this is, what we're going to do…And so then, as that became kind of normal, so she backed off and I just continued doing that.'

For some participants, this type of influence was pivotal and they felt like it helped them to achieve their goal of applying to a 'good' university. For Lacey, not having any support or role models was difficult at home and she felt a 'pull' to live up to the typical life that she felt was expected of her. When questioned about her home situation, Lacey explained:

> [Lacey] 'My parents don't work. No one in my family before this generation has ever made it to university. The area I live in…not many people go to university…. And in a way, that's why I was so significantly different in school because it didn't happen often. I don't know anyone in the local area that ever went to a university that wasn't five miles away. Not many people leave here. Most people work supermarkets for the rest of their lives or become carers. That's what this area is. Yeah, so like in this area it is unusual. There's not many kids that get them kind of grades [high grades]. It's really unusual, so I think that kind of makes it different.'

Lacey explained that sometimes that made her feel like 'a bit of a freak' in keeping with previous research on the idea of being different and set apart (Neihart et al 2016). Other participants noted how parents did not understand what they were experiencing and over-compensated, latching on to a particular notion and inadvertently creating more pressure in the process. One respondent noted how they felt they had to apply for medicine because that was what their parents wanted.

For high achieving students whose parents had never been to university or did not really understand the competitive university application system, there was often a sense of frustration which invariably left the STAR students feeling isolated and unsupported:

[Wanisha] 'I just think people don't know the stuff that I'm doing...nobody knows like the process, no one knows like the kind of training nobody knew about the UCAT [extra medicine exam]. My mum was like, 'What's a UCAT?" Yeah, I think a lot of people underestimate like the work that I do.'

This therefore resulted in a simplistic and transactional relationship predicated on grades and achievement between the high achieving students and their parents or guardians. One student bemoaned that her parents had become so used to her achieving high grades that when she recently told them about an A grade in her Biology test, their immediate reaction was 'why not an A*?' Thus, the experience for some of the STAR students was one of relentless pressure to achieve high grades but without the parental support or tools to achieve those grades.

For some of the participants, lacking support at home in their academic studies was a source of anxiety and this was particularly felt financially - one student even asked for a tutor as a Christmas present. For Charlene, there was definitely a tension between applying to Oxbridge and how much money they had at home and this was related when questioned on her experience of being a high achieving student at home:

[Charlene] 'My mum got me a tutor for biology, which I felt a bit bad about coz we didn't actually have that much money and I saw that this person is like £35 an hour and she comes to my house once a week and we just go over biology past papers. So I think maybe it wasn't the tutor as such, but knowing how much money that costs made me actually work really hard at biology so that tutor is worth something. So that made me work harder.'

Finally, in considering the high achieving student experience within the home, it was also evident that the participants felt that ethnic background played a significant role. One third of the interview participants (four people) would consider themselves to be from minority ethnic backgrounds and that was felt to play a key part in their experience particularly around expectations and work ethic. For Wanisha, the expectation from her Bengali parents was huge, particularly surrounding the pressure to enter medicine and what that would mean. When questioned how her family (originating from Bangladesh) impacted her experience of being a high achieving student, she replied:

[Wanisha] 'I actually can't put my finger on it but Bengali parents really like their kids to go in to medicine. And why... I do think it's just [about] stability....And especially coz like they've grown up seeing like a lack of doctors and in like their villages and like where they've lived and it's like... if they came with their daughter who's a doctor and like all these people who are ill because like people in Bangladesh.... everybody's got diabetes like everybody...they just want people to help... It's a plus on every side. Like you get to help people, you know everything, you're smart and you get a lot of money. There's just nothing wrong with it... Plus... like if you're a doctor, it's easier to get you married off'

The closeness of the family and the prospect that she would be part of some form of an arranged marriage also meant that Wanisha was limited by her family to only apply to universities which were close to home so that she could carry on living at home (Ball et al 2002).

For Helen, who identifies from Asia, this element of her home background contributed to her work ethic as she explained when questioned about the influence of her family's ethnic background:

[Helen] 'Yeah, my parents have always supported me in anything I wanted to do, and they've always given me great opportunities like going to [Asian] school...that's actually where I found my love for maths as well coz I was learning it in two different languages and in two different ways and it really helps me grasp like a greater understanding of the subject I think. And I think I've always been able to handle a big workload because. Well, I'm half [Asian], so when I was younger, I attended English school from Monday to Friday and then [Asian] school on a Saturday. So, I was attending two different schools and I had two lots of homework. So, I think my time management really kind of came from doing that as a child.'

Helen felt that having Asian heritage really helped her in her high achieving experience and the discipline and skills that were instilled in her from attending an extra school on a Saturday gave her advantages during her A-levels at Sixth Form college.

Thus, the experience of the high achieving STAR students at home was mixed. There was still relentless pressure to achieve high grades and this was either supported or hindered at home. For some students who had family support, the pursuit of high grades and aspirations was nurtured in terms of physical or emotional support or

even financial help. For others there was a misunderstanding of the desired help needed and this often created an environment where the high achieving students felt isolated or at worst, more pressured to fulfil parental high expectations.

Having therefore looked at the STAR student experience within the home, the findings will now move on to look at the experience of the high achieving students online during the lockdowns of 2020-21 throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

The experience of being high achieving online

As detailed in chapter 1, the research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic in which time the students experienced either a full lockdown where lessons went online or a hybrid model where they alternated weeks between online lessons and socially distanced lessons in the classroom at college. For the high achieving participants who had thrived on a daily rigour of academic challenge, this was a confusing time, particularly with the speed at which the first lockdown took place in March 2020. When asked about how the transition into lockdown felt, Helen articulated her worries:

> [Helen] 'It was a huge shock. And then when the news came out that we weren't going to sit, the GCSEs, I didn't really know what to do coz I had this huge pile of stuff that I'd done for these exams. And then especially before it was decided that it was going to be teacher assessed grades. I was very like…well worried about my grades not portraying what I've... Or not representing the work that I've put in and what I can do coz I like to think I'm quite strong in exams over being outspoken in class. So I was quite worried about that. yeah, but it was….It was very weird. It was really weird….To try and figure out what to do.'

For the high achieving students, it was the same worries of grades but a feeling that the goalposts had moved to perhaps benefit students who were more vocal in class then the ones who had prepared and performed best in tests. For students who were preparing for GCSEs and transferring to the Sixth Form college in September, it represented a major break with no lessons or exams occurring from March 2020. Much has been made of the notion of 'lost-learning' (Leahy et al 2021) and for these students it was particularly noticeable when comparing Lockdown 1 (March

to July 2020) with lockdown 2 (January to March 2021) with provision for students being patchy. Several participants explained the difficulties of learning in lockdown when asked a question about their experience of this time:

> [Allana] 'I think the first lockdown, the learning was really bad. I mean, there was nothing with online learning and I think the subjects didn't really have that much… like they didn't know what was going on to they couldn't support us at all. So with some of my subjects they just told us what to learn, but they didn't tell us how to actually like teach ourselves. We had to just teach ourselves and be expected to know everything whereas in other subjects we actually got more support so I think in the first lockdown, teaching was just basically non-existent because we didn't have anything… for like the first…I don't know two months I think, and then we had like those [online] lessons. But then those lessons were just so…. I don't know…messy.'

> [Lacey] 'At home I don't always get all my work done. I can't always follow the lessons properly, so I was kind of expecting it, but sort of like that to me is a huge loss.'

> [Vidal] 'With music it was a bit... you couldn't perform with anyone. It was just kind of sat at the computer talking about performing.'

Whilst for some STAR students, the expectation that they could take part in lessons from home was hindered by technology with some struggling with wi-fi issues. One participant was sharing her home with eight people and so she found that the connections were sometimes poor or when she did manage to connect, found it almost impossible to actually find anywhere quiet to take part in the online lesson.

When students did have online lessons and were able to participate, the transition was difficult such as the act of simply asking a question in class. Helen explained when detailing her experience of online learning:

> [Helen] 'Well, the cameras are off the mics [microphones] are off so anything you want to say goes through the chat… And yeah, it's just very daunting to be that person who is the one that's asking for everyone to see.'

Similarly, Aaliyah found that she could no longer use her high achieving peers as a support network like she had done pre-lockdown:

> [Aaliyah] 'I know in physics...I used to sit next to Natalie [pseudonym] and if I didn't get something I'd ask her and if she didn't get it we'd try to like work it out together, which I thought was really good because it helped me think…

but now it's like I've got no one there. I kind of have to do it on my own and I feel like because I can't see everyone else's progress as well… I feel like I'm always behind like I'm always lower down.'

The loss of friendship, collaboration and peer-to-peer support that high achieving students felt was such a beneficial part of the STAR programme had been lost and there were a number of simple skills and disciplines that the participants felt had diminished during the lockdowns. Some commented how they had become 'lazy' in writing notes as all the online lessons were recorded so they could always go back to the recordings. Others found themselves not 'attending' online lessons as they were demotivated at being sat in the same place all day – a thought that horrified them as up until that point they had had perfect attendance. Even teachers that were considered 'scary' and commanded their respect, lost their dynamic online and consequently some participants indicated a loss of motivation and general malaise for academic studies. The knock-on effect of this for the students was a genuine experience of lost learning and a fear that they would dip in terms of their usual grades. This was reflected in Aaliyah's answer to how she felt about her experience of lockdown:

> [Aaliyah] 'I'm worried, like I'm always scared I'm not going to get the grades now because my performance has been decreasing because of lockdown. I haven't been able to keep it at steady in some subjects at least and then if I don't get the grades, I can't get into University. If I can't get into university, what am I doing?'

The move to online also affected the students' confidence in their aspirations and future. A good example of this was the changes to opportunities such as open days and the lack of 'in-person' events replaced with online events. In any normal year, students would be able to enhance their personal statement through taking part in university-based activities, however, this was not the case in this unique year. Helen reflected on this when asked about how she had found the move to being online:

> [Helen] 'Yeah, I think one of my biggest worries is university open days because not being able to go in person really kind of… just doesn't feel like I know how I feel about that university fully because I'm not there… it's… it's over a screen.'

As will be shown in the next chapter regarding Widening Participation programmes, the transition to online had a considerable impact for these high achieving students and gave them a cheapened and abridged experience of university and other aspirations in which contact with these institutions was reduced to online university experience seminars (overwhelmingly seen as 'boring') and identikit promotional videos ('just the same no matter the university').

Thus, for the high achieving STAR students the transition to online was a difficult experience characterised by a problematic transition to online learning and a dwindling of skills and opportunities.

This findings section has therefore sought to build up a picture of the lived experience of high achieving STAR students. It has found student experience to be characterised by a relentless focus on high grades, a focus on difference and identity formation and a key role played by the institution in which this lived experience plays out. This is further exacerbated for most by pressure and expectation at home, although for some there is some support. Universally, the transitions experienced during the lockdowns as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic were hard and resulted in a challenging experience for these students online. This will now be further discussed and elucidated on using Bourdieu's toolkit.

Discussion

Having presented the findings regarding the lived experience of high achieving sixth form students in the three sites of the college, home and online, this section will now begin to theorise the findings using the Bourdieusian toolkit outlined in Chapter 3.

In using a Bourdieusian analysis, mapping the field and subsequent sub-fields of the research site was a way to fully understand the objective structure of relations between the agents who occupied each site and to ultimately understand the logic of practice that constituted the lived experience of the STAR students. As discussed in chapter 3, Bourdieu saw fields as entirely relational structures defined by

positions (Steinmetz 2016). Thus, in considering the positions from the findings, it was possible to identify four distinct sub-fields that were part of the wider field of education. These were, the Sixth Form College, home, the online learning world and the Oxbridge application system. Figure 1 details this for more clarity and explains the key agents occupying each sub-field as well as the prevailing doxa of each sub-field. Each diagram is not to a particular scale and so each quadrant or section does not represent amounts of capital accrued within the field placings, however the arrows symbolise the sense of movement within the particular sub-field and how there is a constant struggle over and for resources (Thompson 2014: 66).

This chapter will now discuss the first three sub-fields in turn. The following chapter is entirely devoted to the sub-field of the Oxbridge application system in order to fully answer my second and third research questions.

Figure 1: Diagram of sub-fields and agents occupying each space with prevailing doxa
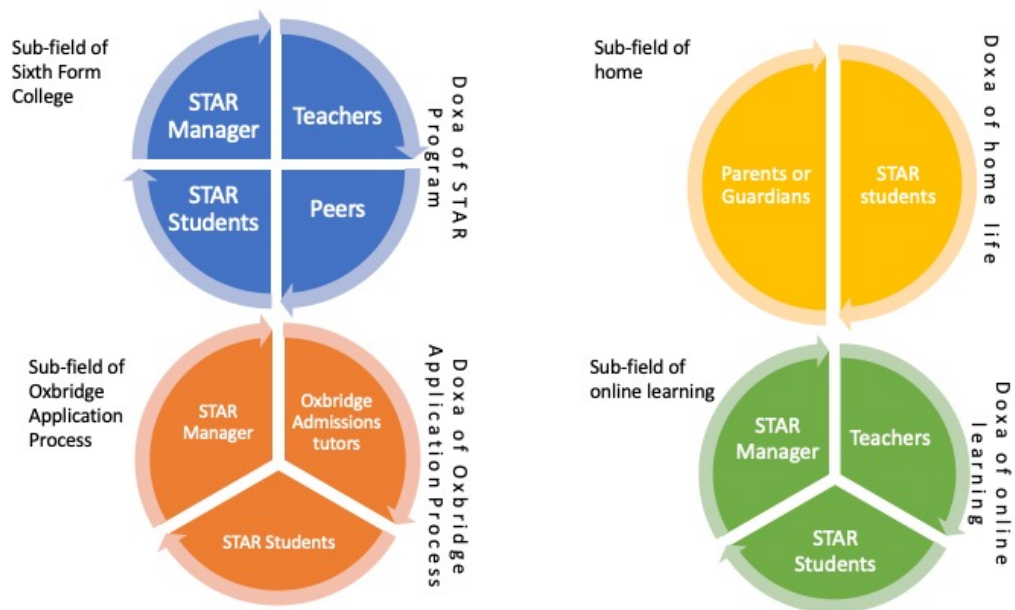
The prevailing doxa of the sub-field of college

In considering the placings within this sub-field, it was evident that four key figures were ever-present. These were the high achieving students themselves, their peers, their teachers and the STAR manager (myself). When considering what the struggle for resources was, invariably it came down to some form of success criteria – more

often than not this was in the form of grades and ultimately what high grades would lead to. For the STAR students, there was a sense of being on a treadmill of grade comparison, beginning with their SATs before moving on to GCSEs and then A-levels. Similar to Stubbs and Murphy (2020) this was congruent with the notion that it was not until national assessments that students really started to benchmark themselves in terms of achievement.

In trying to understand this sub-field, it was evident that the prevailing doxa of the Sixth Form College and the STAR programme was paramount. Described by Bourdieu as the 'natural' pre-reflexive shared set of opinions and beliefs about a given field (Bourdieu 2000: 16), it was evident from the research that the STAR programme had specific systems and culture in place that was unquestioned and had become the 'cornerstone' (Deer 2014: 116) of this particular sub-field for the STAR students. This institutional habitus (Reay 1998) yielded a certain power and dominance over individual participants that often began during the application process a year earlier in year 11 when prospective students went through a process of a written application, interview and then meeting a threshold in attaining GCSE grades of seven 7s. The findings illustrated by Vance (in terms of being monitored to do well on the STAR programme) and Aaliyah (in terms of structurally being allowed to take a fourth A-Level) showed how just the act of getting on such a programme and the taken-for-granted assumptions about the programme, perhaps modified their own habitus to a more university focused, high achieving culture before they had even set foot in the college. This sentiment continued, illustrated by Helen, who felt that her aspirations had been raised towards attending an elite university by being on the STAR programme and consequently felt the effects of the institutional habitus. Of particular surprise was the depth of feeling exhibited from the participants about wanting to be part of the STAR programme and how this aspiration started before physically entering the college at the start of Sixth form. As will be expanded upon in the remaining chapters, there are also interesting parallels with how this mirrors the Oxbridge Application process.

From a Bourdieusian perspective it was clear that the prevailing institutional habitus of the STAR programme was a dominant force in the participants' experience. In the

struggle to attain high grades and ultimately gain entry to (usually) a Russell Group university, the STAR programme gave opportunities and experiences to increase social and cultural capital through access to university WP programmes and forced connections with other high achieving STAR students. This institutional habitus was unquestioned and was 'natural' for these students – factors such as the entry criteria of seven 7s, the pastoral curriculum, advice and guidance, university experiences and Oxbridge strategy went unchecked without any critique. Moreover, the doxa of the STAR programme was essentially down to myself – articulating and making decisions *as* the programme, enacting institutional habitus. The findings revealed my role at the apex of the STAR programme as one which carried a considerable weight within these students' experiences. In the struggle for high grades, my own seemingly arbitrary decisions could have considerable bearing (such as suggesting to a student they should apply to Oxbridge) and this will be reflected upon further in the Participant Objectivication section of chapter 7.

Student experience of high achievement at college

Having understood the dominance of the prevailing institutional habitus of the sixth form college and the STAR programme, it was also important to understand the role it played in the participants' experience of difference. For many participants, they experienced twin demarcations of their ability at the same time – firstly they received external verification in national tests regarding where they stood in terms of ability in the form of GCSE results and secondly, gaining a place on the STAR cohort. Similar to Lo and Parath's (2017) modern identification paradigm (in chapter 2) and mirroring Stubbs and Murphy's (2020) research, these key definers of difference marked out to themselves and other people that they were in their eyes officially 'clever'. The impact of this was the experience of unrelenting expectation and pressure to achieve high grades. The participants often felt that teachers, peers and the STAR manager (myself) made assumptions regarding workload and being able to cope with a level of pressure which led to the use of certain strategies being employed to deflect or minimise the expectation (Henfield et al 2015) such as

Charlene 'toning down' the fact that she was an STAR student to her peers whilst receiving intense support in her application for Oxbridge. Thus, in the sub-field of college, the struggle for resources was complex in that participants could indicate a habitus that valued the social capital gained from maintaining friendships with potentially hostile (or at least ambivalent) peers who had shown disregard for the STAR programme or their own perceived ability or perhaps revealed a habitus that did not want to draw attention to their own ability. If the ultimate goal in this sub-field was to achieve high grades, these high achieving students indicated the need for support and friendship but also the complex nature of fitting in that that could entail (Gaither 2008).

With regards to the academic literature, a key feature of the experience of being high achieving was how this shaped one's identity (Cross et al 2015). In many respects, the pursuit of high grades and the pressure and stress that went with that was the single most common theme and desire amongst the participants. Such was the focus to achieve, that on occasion the STAR students revealed that they obsessed about the grades in and of it itself i.e. they didn't care what the grade meant or what achieving a high grade did for them – they just wanted the highest grade in the same way an Olympic athlete craves a gold medal. This can be seen by the bouts of anger and reproach endured when they didn't get a grade A or A* such as Aaliyah's comments about how hard she was on herself if she got a C in a test. All participants summed up their current experience of college as one in pursuit of grades. There was a sense of being on a never-ending treadmill of national tests that began with SATs and continued through to GCSEs and A-Levels and would continue into a degree and beyond. Interestingly, none of the participants felt particularly happy or satisfied, rather it was an endless competition in which they had to keep winning. In a Bourdieusian sense, this struggle to always achieve high grades was the guiding principle of decision making and therefore their dispositions indicated a habitus that helped advance their field position to achieving their goal. This could be seen in their choice of friends (one participant commented that they preferred fellow STAR students as they could study together in the library) to attendance at college (a number of the participants detailed how they may not

attend certain revision lessons as they could get more done at home under their own guidance).

Moreover, when seeing the relentless pursuit of high grades over a period of time, it was possible to begin to understand the bigger picture of the STAR student's lives, what Bourdieu (1988: 1976) would term 'conatus'. Seen as a way of making sense of an individual's 'life trajectory' (Fuller 2014: 169), it was possible to piece together numerous examples of individual decisions to form a sense of STAR identity. Thus, it could be suggested that the participants' conatus was one of high grade pursuit. Interestingly this desire to always highly achieve could bring success (such as entrance into Oxbridge) but also negative feelings of never fulfilling expectations. Crucially for Fuller (2014: 173) the mark of conatus is that 'people adjust their subjective expectations to match their objective chances'. Thus, the findings perhaps illustrated this modification of identity in some of the participants. This can be seen in how Wanisha rationalised an incident in her life regarding gaining entry to a university and re-calibrated onwards, still in the pursuit of high grades. The findings perhaps indicate that the struggle and pursuit of high grades and 'success' in terms of achievement is so powerful, that habitus is modified along the way to mitigate setbacks and ultimately stay on a (modified) track to carry on achieving. Pivotal here is the notion that once students have been demarcated as high achieving – even if an event occurs that makes them realise they are not as able as they thought (such as university rejection), they are still able to rationalise and continue going forward. In this sense conatus helps explain the process through which high achieving students negotiate the sub-fields and the decisions and life events that take place as their habitus is modified at key points.

Finally, for the majority of the STAR participants, the importance of friendships with fellow STAR students was paramount. The ability to share, offload and unwind with equivalent individuals who understood the experience of being high achieving was vitally important with the sheer size of the STAR cohort being a considerable strength for some students having felt isolated at their previous school. Cacey demonstrated in the findings how she felt amongst 'like-minded' people and Darren articulated how such friendships enabled virtuous collaborations and

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encouragement with other STAR students. Indeed, this was evident in how some students formed study groups and social media groups around particular themes such as preparation for medicine examinations or Oxbridge interviews. In a Bourdieusian sense, such instances could be considered the accumulation of social capital to help achieve the goal of high grades. This may not be the tactical and strategic social capital of forging key relationships with major stakeholders in the sub-field (Burke 2015) but nevertheless this was an important part of STAR experience that made 'playing the game' tolerable with peer to peer alliances making a difference in their approach to navigating the sub-field.

However, the notion of friendships and peers creating effective collaboration and support was also double-edged with some STAR students indicating that the element of competition and being surrounded by other high achieving people was a source of anxiety and stress. Indeed, in the struggle for resources within the sub-field, Thompson (2014) reminds us that it is a 'battlefield' and although peers may be a source of support they could also be competing for the same places at university or after the same prize of high grades. This therefore paints a complex picture in which we find one participant, Charlene, unsure what her own identity is and perhaps displaying an unresolved habitus, recognising that she outwardly appears as a high achieving student, but inwardly she has never felt this, always striving to achieve the highest she can but never feeling the reward or success or that her journey has ended.

Yet, despite some of the pressures of maintaining high grades and performing at the highest level, most of the students acknowledged how being high achieving was ultimately a positive experience.

This section has discussed the experience of being high achieving within the sub-field of the sixth form college and found it to be one of a relentless focus on grades and achievement that is the hallmark of the student's life trajectory (conatus). It is marked by being different and this is often kick started and maintained by the STAR programme and the Sixth Form College in enacting an institutional habitus which was taken for granted by the STAR students. On the whole their experience was mixed, being highly competitive but one in which their identity shifts in order to fit

in. The next section will now discuss the experience of being high achieving in the home.

Being high achieving in the sub-field of home

If the experience for the STAR students in college was one of an unrelenting emphasis to achieve high grades, then that did not change in the sub-field of home. The big difference was the level of support and understanding they received and there was a marked difference between students who felt supported and those that didn't. For some participants there was substantial pressure to either escape the pull of their home environment (Lacey spoke of how her parents didn't work, she was the first in her family to apply to university and most people in her home town worked in supermarkets or as carers); or to escape family hardships (Allana felt she had to please her parents who arrived as refugees from Asia on a long and treacherous journey over five years). This contrasted with others who had both physical and mental support with being high achieving such as Vance's example of being helped with revision by his mother. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the struggle for resources was still the same – the acquisition of high grades was still the goal – however, the participants within this sub-field were just the STAR student themselves and their family/cohabitation arrangement members. Thus, the extent of a family members capital was pivotal in helping facilitate the aspiration of the STAR student. This could be seen in how Charlene's mother demonstrated enough economic capital to be able to get a weekly biology tutor to support her in her studies. Vance's mother having experienced university and gained a degree, had the appropriate cultural and social capital to recognise strategies to facilitate that journey and physically help her son where possible. For those students who had low capital in this area, this was a problematic time, with family members at best demonstrating misunderstood ambivalence – Wanisha's mum enquiring of Wanisha about an entrance examination – 'What's a UCAT' – and at worst an extra obstacle that has to be overcome and managed e.g one participant recounting that her

parents obsessed on the prospect of her being a doctor and not seeing the difficult experience she was having.

Such notions of capital were also witnessed through those participants who identified from minority ethnic groups – this added another more complex dimension to the STAR student's field placing. For Wanisha, the expectation and pressure to become a doctor was huge for her parents, her extended family and wider community (Ball et al 2002). Thus we can see their understanding of the field and the expectation and perceived advantages of higher social, cultural and economic capital that undertaking such a job would bring and also the symbolic capital of returning back to Bangladesh with a daughter who is a doctor and what this would do for marriage prospects. This in turn shaped the decisions she made such as being only able to accept university offers from courses that were close to home (similar to Ball et al's (2002) experience of the 'contingent chooser'). Conversely, Helen experienced more parental control (Reay et al 2005), being half-Asian, in the form of having to attend extra-schooling and language lessons to retain knowledge and understanding of her heritage. Here we could see Helen's cultural capital increasing and she happily admitted that it had given her more skills to be able to handle the pressures of being high achieving. Thus, although a very small sub-sample, the findings indicated the extra complexity of having a family background that would consider themselves from a minority ethnic group – on the one hand this could create extra pressure and expectation, but on the other such expectations could be channelled to ultimately carve out extra capital that could be advantageous in the wider field of education.

In summary, the experience of STAR students within the home was primarily concerned with the notion of support and how well this increases, stabilises or decreases their capital in the wider field of education and subsequent sub-fields. The relentless pressure and struggle to achieve high grades was ever present, but the role of parents or guardians could be quite pivotal in helping high achieving students both physically and mentally deal with that pressure. This was further made complex for students who identified from minority ethnic groups who

experienced added expectation and pressure because of cultural and social expectations from their heritage.

Having therefore looked at the experience of being high achieving in the home, this discussion section will finally move on to discuss the experience in the online learning sub-field.

The experience of being high achieving in the sub-field of online learning

As was mentioned in chapter 1, the research occurred during the global Covid-19 pandemic, primarily taking place between October 2020 and May 2021. Within this time students experienced an unprecedented change in schooling ranging from no lessons to online lessons to a hybrid system of one week in college and one week at home online. 'Online' in this sense meant lessons 'taught' by a teacher using software such as Teams or Zoom in which students participated virtually in their usual classes at their usual lesson times. The difference being that the lesson was delivered remotely and for issues of safeguarding and often student embarrassment, invariably student cameras were off. This was supplemented by the sharing of resources such as notes and handouts as well as the recording of the lesson on the College's Virtual Learning Environment which every student and teacher of the college could access. Indeed, the closing of schools and colleges for such long periods of time and subsequent move to this new form of teaching and learning has arguably never occurred before and therefore the findings represent new understanding on a major societal change (Graham 2020).

In Bourdieusian terms the closing of schools and college represented a profound field change from the sub-field of college to the sub-field of being online and as revealed by the findings, was a shocking and confusing time for the STAR students. The students occupied a liminal space (Thomassen 2009) that was neither here nor there (Gieson 2015): it was not college and not home (whilst the students were technically at home, they were in a different 'place' online). Thus, what had worked previously for the high achieving students in the settings of college and home now had to be 'trialled' online. There was still a struggle to achieve high grades, however,

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the habitus that had previously been employed (and to some extent worked) in college or home lagged behind and had to change and adapt to this new sub-field position. Such a situation Bourdieu termed 'a hysteresis of habitus' (Graham 2020) and this can be seen in how what had previously been the norm had now changed. The social practice that had worked face to face in college and home was uprooted and tried in the online world. Hence, Helen struggled to ask questions online as she felt online the forum was too open and other people would notice – what would have been a quiet word and a mini one-to-one encounter in the face-to-face classroom was now a whole class encounter in which her lack of ability or understanding on a particular topic could be exposed. Similarly, Aaliyah felt the impact of not having a friend and collaborator 'physically' sit next to her and spur her on and work together in solving a problem. As highlighted earlier, one of the strengths of the STAR programme was the ability to find and work with like-minded peers and this now could not take place. In each case, this was an issue of in-lesson problem solving and the habitus that would have previously been employed of either asking a question or working with a friend was tried and failed – illustrating the hysteresis of habitus.

In moving to online lessons, it is possible to assume these incidents represented a loss. As the findings illustrated, this is not only a loss of learning – some Year 11 students at the time of lockdown in March 2020 did not have a single lesson until September 2020 – but also a loss of capital that significantly affected their field position. In not feeling able to ask questions or collaborate, high achieving students lost valuable cultural and social capital. To be inquisitive and to have a zest for learning are valuable attributes desired at university interviews (such as Oxbridge as will be detailed in the next chapter) and therefore Covid-19 and the move to lockdown diminished such associated capitals and made their struggle for high grades even harder. Also, of interest was what occurred when the habitus did catch up – how did STAR students' habitus 'adapt'? – What did they learn about the new 'rules of the game?' In the liminal space of online learning, some high achieving students adapted their habitus to one which became ambivalent to learning. They documented how previously strict teachers who maintained the discipline of high-

grade achievement could not maintain such focus online. Thus, the findings detailed STAR students, some of whom had not missed a day of education in their lives, 'truanting' from an online class because they knew they could catch up on the recorded lesson. Other participants detailed how they stopped taking notes as they could always rewind the video. The adaptation of habitus to a new sub-field illustrates the plasticity of habitus and a sense of how students quickly understood the new doxa of the sub-field. However, whilst the students, employed and recognised a new habitus, they also understood the consequences and perhaps Aaliyah's fear in the findings, knowing that her grades are dropping, is an understanding that she recognises her declining field position in the pursuit of high grades.

Therefore, as will be documented in the next chapter in terms of Widening Participation and open days, the move to online was a difficult period for the STAR students epitomised by a hysteresis of habitus of lagged adaptation that ultimately diminished their field positions in the quest for high grades. Although, there was seemingly no alternative for learning during the pandemic, nevertheless this research suggests that the high achieving sixth form students struggled with the move online and both their learning and opportunities to advance themselves suffered as a result.

Summary

This chapter began with the findings of answering the first research question to understand the lived experience of high achieving sixth form students. It identified three key sites of interest, notably in college, in the home and online. The findings illustrated how this experience was characterised by a relentless focus on high grades with Northwest Sixth Form College and the STAR programme playing a key part in underlining their sense of difference from the rest of college. The findings also showed how this focus on achievement was also both helped and hindered at home, but consistently proved very difficult online during the pandemic. The subsequent discussion used the work of Bourdieu to highlight how the sixth form

college, home and online could all be considered sub-fields in which there was a struggle to gain high grades amongst various actors within these sub-fields. The discussion illustrated the prevailing institutional habitus of the STAR programme and how identity was shaped through a modification of habitus. It also revealed the lived experience of online learning through the pandemic to be problematic, characterised by a hysteresis of habitus in which students struggled to adapt to the quick changing field conditions. This lived experience of STAR students will now be further looked into with regards to the Oxbridge Application process and their decision-making.

Chapter 6: Findings and discussion – The Oxbridge application process

As discussed in chapter 4, an initial focus group was carried out to clarify my research questioning for the interview stage. In this second chapter regarding my findings, I will first highlight the initial findings from the focus group before detailing how my questioning changed for the part of the interview schedule (appendix 7) concerning the Oxbridge application process. From the outset, I wanted to address my final two research questions of:

- What is the lived experience of high achieving students in preparing and going through the Oxbridge application process?

- How are their decisions informed in applying to Oxbridge?

These two research questions were key to my understanding of the social practice of the STAR students as I wanted to know how it felt for the students themselves going through this process, where the key decisions were and how they came to make those decisions. As discussed in chapter 4, the focus group consisted of seven STAR students and this was an opportunity to gain a preliminary overview of their experiences from their perspective which could then be followed up in greater depth during the interviews. The initial set of questions (appendix 6) centred around each stage of the application process: deciding to apply; writing the personal statement; entrance exams; mock interviews; actual interviews; offer/rejection; and gaining their final grades.

Focus group initial results

In terms of the Oxbridge application process, when asked about how they felt about the process, the dominant feeling from the group was the mismatch between the expectation of what they thought it would be like and the reality. At the time of the focus group, many of the students had just been through the entrance exam for Oxbridge after just submitting their UCAS personal statements and it was clear that doubts had formed as to how well they had done and their own view of themselves.

This was evident in answer to the question on how they felt the Oxbridge application process was going:

> [Hadija] 'For the [Oxbridge] test…I thought I felt confident in doing that but when you do the test you're like "I can't do these questions." I feel a bit awkward and like this is the best I've got!'

> [Lacey] 'It's like in the maths Exam I did every practice paper I could find for the admissions tests and then it came down to it and I barely got the first paper done in time.'

This was not the environment to probe this deeper with individuals as I was conscious that I did not want to embarrass or draw attention to anyone, but the focus group raised the prospect of how well the students really understood what a successful application looked like and what this this did to their own understanding of themselves. Already they were speculating about the potential interviews and how fair the process may be. Much discussion was given to the question topic of the Oxbridge interview with Lacey commenting on what she felt they were looking for:

> [Lacey] 'They're Looking for someone they want to work with... someone they hope to be a colleague with and if at the end of the day it comes down to your interview and they don't like you, then you're not going to get in.'

Consequently, they were beginning to try and 'guess' the process and understand the system they were entwining themselves with but also questioning whether this was fair or whether there were other factors at work in determining if they were successful or not.

From the focus group, I was satisfied that examining each stage of the Oxbridge application process was the right approach, however, it clarified the sensitivity needed as each participant was potentially making themselves vulnerable in sharing their 'success' or 'failure'. From the focus group findings, I added more detail to the questions in the interviews to try and pinpoint when and how decisions were made in order to answer my third research question. Moreover, the focus group confirmed the approach of interviewing 6 former STAR students and 6 current STAR students was the right approach as different perspectives could be gained from students who have been through the whole process versus students currently going

through the process. With this in mind, I added a new question section aimed specifically at the former STAR students and how they viewed the Oxbridge application process looking back.

The findings and discussion for this chapter are therefore based around answering the second and third research questions regarding the Oxbridge application process and the decision making by the students. From the focus group and interviews it was evident the process had different stages and so the findings are grouped around each stage of the process from pre-application through to final offer/rejection. Following this, a discussion takes place in which the findings are subjected to theorisation using the Bourdieusian toolkit outlined in chapter 3.

Planting of the seed: Becoming 'Oxbridge material'

Before all the interviews, tests and challenges of making an application to Oxbridge, students need to make a decision to actually apply. Similar to Stubbs and Murphy (2020), the influence of key personnel and the prevailing institutional culture can be quite pivotal for a STAR student considering themselves as 'Oxbridge material'. This could range from a teacher stating that a students' grades might be indicative of a need for a bigger challenge when considering university to the almost 'tap on the shoulder' culture of being told that they should apply to Oxbridge. In answer to the question of how she came to apply, Jo recalls the key moment:

> [Jo] 'Yeah, I think it was only a specific teacher or like a specific couple of teachers that really like understood that I would... I had the potential and that was in year... like 10... my English teacher probably like started to see that I was, you know. That I had potential.'

For other students the decision to apply did not squarely sit with them and instead they felt 'swept along' by the STAR programme and felt it was an expectation that they should apply to Oxbridge and in fact, would be an easier option to go along with the process instead of resisting it. This echoed the expectations placed on high achieving students and the institutional culture in applying for Oxbridge exemplified by Donnelly (2014: 61-62).

For some participants, the decision to apply did not stem from the influence of a teacher or institution, rather it was the product of exposure and experience to Widening Participation and outreach programmes by universities (as discussed in chapter 2). For a typical STAR student, their first year is often spent building up experiences at taster events and summer schools in a bid to enhance their application and confidence in the process (Burke 2012). As part of the STAR programme, all students are made aware of these experiences and time is set aside to help students apply. Indeed, to even get to a point of applying for a scheme can be a challenge with one respondent describing that despite being bombarded with opportunities she just felt that they were 'not meant for her'. For students who did take part in such activities, these events were crucial to providing them with the necessary skills and confidence to make a successful application. Very often such an experience 'normalised' their initial pre-conceptions – for instance, Wanisha was astonished to find that Oxbridge students 'watched Netflix' and this led her further down her personal journey to imagining a future at Oxbridge (Stubbs and Murphy 2020). Indeed, for a number of participants, spending time at Oxbridge made the process seem real but also accessible, particularly when they met teaching staff at Oxbridge and gained encouragement. When answering a question surrounding her pre-application experience for Oxbridge, Jo found a widening participation event really useful:

> [Jo] 'Um, yeah, I think it was definitely... like it opened that up as a place to go and you know that's why I ended up applying because it was... It really seemed like a possibility...Like one of the best experiences generally that I've had in the past, like, few years...Like eye opening and stuff to sort of have somebody like... who actually is like a professor and to sort of have a belief in you and to say that "yeah, you should"... You know to encourage you to like apply and to suggest that you actually do have like a potential in education...'

Yet for some of the participants, taking part in such schemes provoked a backlash from their peers who questioned that if they were already getting good grades then why did they need extra assistance? Wanisha explains her experience of pre-application:

> [Wanisha] 'One person said to me like "you're taking advantage of the system if you're doing…like...OXWP [Pseudonym for WP programme], like … If you're bright, you don't need the help and no matter like what your financial background you shouldn't take advantage of these things".'

Likewise, other participants felt that such events and schemes to increase applications to Oxbridge were insulting and bordering on patronising as Cacey articulates in her answer to the question on her experience of pre-application:

> [Cacey] I did the 'OXWP2 [Pseudonym for another WP programme] that they started doing. Cos they're focused on getting disadvantaged kids through the door. It sort of almost makes you feel like that if you're a disadvantaged kid coming through the door that they've like done you a favour… you're only wanted because....You're needed...you're needed to fit some stats and say they have so many percentage of kids from poor places and stuff or certain postcodes...'

This highlights the double-edged nature of the widening participation process. On the one hand there is an acknowledgement that certain groups of people are under-represented at Oxbridge, but it is also difficult to produce schemes that are not tokenistic or appear patronising. On the whole, there was a feeling from participants that the extra schemes were beneficial, however only when they involved physical visits to Oxbridge – this was particularly pertinent for students who were applying to Oxbridge during Lockdown [2020-21] when all widening participation schemes and opportunities went online due to Covid restrictions (TASO 2022). For these students, this created a disadvantage so that even simple open days were all online. To not get a 'flavour' of Oxbridge was disconcerting for the STAR students. There was a feeling that they were being asked to make an application 'blind' without any physical or emotional connection to Oxbridge as a place or as site of learning with the online events being not 'real' enough. For some participants, although they did make the decision to apply, it was from a position of indifference or being told that they should, rather than a yearning from themselves that that is what they wanted to do. As will be detailed in the Oxbridge Interviews section underneath, this absence of motivation caused through a lack of affinity with an institution may have hampered them at later stages of the process.

Pre-application perceptions of Oxbridge: Obstacles to and possibilities of an imagined future

Having looked at how the STAR students considered themselves as 'Oxbridge material' in relation to teacher recommendations, institutional factors or Widening Participation Schemes, I was interested in their perceptions and reasons for applying and some of the obstacles they confronted in their 'imagined future' at Oxbridge (Stubbs and Murphy 2020). Throughout the interviews, recurring 'myths' surrounding Oxbridge were a common feature which in a sense were students articulating their observations of the culture of applying to Oxbridge whilst also reinforcing the perceived 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu 1990) of this process. These were often stories passed from student to student underlining the difficulties of applying to Oxbridge. From the outset, some students struggled with both the physical and mental concept of Oxbridge and what it represented. This was evidence by Charlene when asked about why she applied to Oxbridge:

> [Charlene] 'It was such an abstract term it could have been in China. It could have just been…It's just something so far away…'

For Charlene, being 'so far away' was multi-faceted: geographically (Oxbridge was over three hours away by car), conceptually (she could not imagine what life would be like there) and physically (the very high entry grades and admissions process presented a significant hurdle). Indeed, the sense of certain obstacles being present was a key theme for the participants. Sometimes STAR students would automatically rule themselves out as they thought there was a specific type or skill Oxbridge were looking for and so therefore, they would not meet the criteria. Indeed, the mystery surrounding not knowing specific criteria that would gain acceptance into Oxbridge prompted the passing round of certain myths that set entry standards that were unobtainable and how even perceived perfection was not good enough such as stories of straight A* students being rejected before even being invited to interview. This could also be seen in the approach to extra tests and interviews to the point where there was a feeling of resignation that perhaps because of their backgrounds and attendance at a state sixth form college, they were perhaps hindered in their

preparation compared to private school students. This was shown by Vance when asked why he was applying to Oxbridge:

> [Vance] 'I'd heard a lot of rumours about people who have been kind of coached for the entrance exams, which obviously I hadn't, so I thought I was going to be at quite a major disadvantage going in. And so I thought that might have played a part or they might just be smarter...'

In each of these cases the perception of Oxbridge, even before they had even begun applying to the universities was of a difficult to enter system in which they were already at a disadvantage and often the outsider. The notion of rumour or myth put these STAR students on the back foot and far from approaching the process with confidence, they were hesitant underdogs, not believing they were 'Oxbridge material' (Byrom et al 2007).

Yet, in the full knowledge of this information, they still wanted to apply. This was primarily due to the idea of prestige and what the dream and hope of an Oxbridge degree would do (Montacute and Cullinane 2018). In answer to why he applied to Oxbridge, Darren was very candid:

> [Darren] 'Sounds quite big headed, but the elite-ness was actually really nice. And I guess I am able to say that like it's an elite University and that's... You know it's very... very selective. And just yeah, I think that kind of... to be able to say "oh yeah I went to Oxbridge" and kind of show off a bit and kind of have a badge of..."Ohh yeah, I'm quite intelligent...".'

Indeed, in the same way that negative myths circulated amongst the STAR students surrounding the difficulty in making a successful application to Oxbridge, similar stories regarding the prestige of an Oxbridge degree also were shared and the advantages in life that it could bring. One participant recognised the potential benefits when asked what he felt an Oxbridge degree would do:

> [Vance] 'I think the key is kind of the connections that you make there...that Oxbridge carries a bit of weight, and so if there is a situation where I might be getting a job or something, Oxbridge might just tip it slightly in my favour. Also, because you get to say that you went to Oxbridge, which is always a win.'

Here, Vance perceives an Oxbridge degree to not only enhance his status as well as his social and cultural capital, but also recognises the existence of an 'Old boys

network' (Watters 2016) that could (unfairly) enhance his career prospects in much the same way that Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) found that existing Oxbridge students were unwilling to recognise their own advantages and sought to legitimise them.

Within the circulation of these myths and stories we can begin to understand a tension – a sense of applying to an elite institution and the cachet that that may bring but also in the knowledge that the chances are they won't be successful because of perceived difficulty or obscure success criteria. There is a seemingly large gap between the dream of an Oxbridge degree and the skewed rules of the game to get there. For Lacey, this makes an application to Oxbridge a game of chance. When asked how she felt about the Oxbridge application as a whole, she replied:

> [Lacey] 'It's like I went into it thinking it's a wildcard. You could have perfect grades, all the work experience in the world and they can still reject you on the spot for someone with lower grades just from a feeling.'

This idea of a 'wildcard' renders the individual as helpless but having a gamble, at the mercy of more powerful forces who decide the fate of applicants. There is also this notion that the Oxbridge selectors do not have a firm set of success criteria and so could base their decisions on a 'feeling' (Mountford-Zimdars 2016). As will be discussed later on, there is a sense of acceptance in Lacey's life trajectory and perhaps the marked difference between state and private school students is the difference between a wildcard and a confident rite of passage.

This section has sought to understand from the very beginning of an application process, how students perceive the process and the myths and stories surrounding it. It is already clear, that even before the process begins, the STAR students perhaps perceive it as a powerful yet flawed system. One that they want to be a part of, but already feel that it may be too elusive. Whilst the STAR students could be talking down their expectations or perhaps seeking some reassurance, the prevalence of myths surrounding the application process amongst all the participants suggests that even before the process officially begins with the sending in of a personal statement, the participants recognised the potential and success of an Oxbridge

degree but were also hesitant and lacking in confidence about entering that process.

The personal statement and entrance examination

The start of the formal application process begins with deciding to apply and writing a personal statement. This usually begins before the summer holidays in July, culminating in submission to UCAS on the 15th October every year. Of particular note for some students was the lack of transparency in writing their personal statement in that they didn't really know how their own personal statements would measure against other applicants or what admissions tutors were looking for. Eddie articulated this when asked about his experience of personal statement writing:

> [Eddie] 'I think it's more just, like I don't know the standard. I didn't know the standard of other peoples' applications kind of thing.'

This left some of the students second guessing on the weighting of the personal statement and even questioning if admissions tutors actually even read it (Mountford-Zimdars 2016: 121). Such was the obscuration of the process that one of the participants took matters into her own hands to make a rough entry criteria checklist to evaluate her own chances as to whether she would be successful or not. In answer to the question on how she prepared for her personal statement, Wanisha replied:

> [Wanisha] 'So I think it was the statistics that really said like this many people with your grades get in and then this many people who are on this programmes get in and then this many people who get into the summer school get in. And I had like all of them. So I think that yeah, the statistics bit was important.'

Both these insights underlined the fragility of the applicants and the arbitrariness of committing to an application when the success criteria was withheld. A clearer application process would undoubtedly have aided these students not to mention all the time and effort they have expended throughout the process.

Having submitted their UCAS application and Personal Statement, most students are then entered for an entrance exam that takes place at the end of October/early

November. This is an in-person exam that occurs for most Oxbridge subjects with students having access to some past papers and mark schemes online. Yet again, a key theme raised by the participants was the lack of transparency that made the application process unfair. Discussing what her experience of the extra tests was like, Cacey questioned the process:

> [Cacey] 'That test [Oxbridge Entrance exam] sort of contributes... like... I'd actually like to know how... how they weigh that... what they're looking for... I think because that's not clear... There's gotta be a line and they've got to draw it... I think that makes it feel like it's a bit unnecessary because they're quite secretive in a way of why they do it.'

For the STAR students, not knowing pass marks, unfamiliarity with the questions and mark scheme and lack of teacher support made the exam a daunting prospect. Described as a 'confidence killer' and 'written in riddles', all participants were adamant that this was the hardest exam they had ever done but of particular note was that they felt the outcome was their own responsibility. When asked how he felt the Oxbridge exam had gone, Vance replied:

> [Vance] 'Exam results... are like cut and dry like you either have them or you haven't achieved the mark that they were looking for. So that is kind of... I think that's quite fair. Coz you have either done well or you didn't. It's kind of black and white.'

Similarly, another respondent felt the ability to meet the criteria and be successful in her application was down to her and so she had to 'up her game' to make opportunities for herself. Therefore for this group of STAR students, the extra entrance exams and preparation for them felt like a difficult and isolated process – for all of them this was a style of exam that they had never done before with a marking and grading process that was unfamiliar and at times felt alien to them. At the time of the research (2020/21) there was little in terms of syllabus, scheme of work or list of skills that they could prepare for, but they still felt that whatever the outcome, responsibility lay squarely with them in their own preparation and technique.

Interviews

Having submitted their application and (for most) completed the entrance exam, potential applicants are then either outright rejected or asked for interview to continue their assessment. This takes place around the end of November/early December and can be in the form of a series of interviews with Oxbridge colleges and departments over a number of days or take place all on one day. Traditionally this would be conducted in the Oxbridge college that they applied to but due to Covid-19, the interviews took place online for the first time ever during November and December 2020.

The shift to online interviews created specific problems for some students where the margins of success and failure are fine (Mountford-Zimdars 2016) and the online element was a source of agitation. When asked how they found the online interviews, Aaliyah and Vidal had clear views:

> [Aaliyah] 'Anything in person would be better than online because you can actually interact properly with the person. You can you see them as a 3D person…Because online there's like a kind of barrier kind of thing I think so you can't really find out their personality as well… So I think some people struggle with that more…'

> [Vidal] '[Online interviews] I think it's a disadvantage. I like to actually look at the person and be with the person while I'm speaking and going through stuff. I...feel it's much more…personal.'

The lack of connection that already existed with Oxbridge due to not being able to visit the place in person during lockdown was further amplified by the switch to online interviews. Furthermore, the move to online created more complications for the STAR cohort. Indeed, Vidal had a stressful time as he did not have the right equipment for the interview. Due to the online nature of the interview, the college had specified that Vidal needed a touch screen tablet to show his working out during an interview. Vidal did not have one, nor could he afford one. The fact that the Oxbridge college had said it was essential was a major cause of anxiety and although he did eventually use a simple whiteboard and pen during his interview

which did seem to suffice, Vidal still felt that those candidates who had a tablet would be at an advantage and went into his interview with this as his main focus.

Many of the STAR students pondered what a successful interview was like and how a good online interview correlated to a successful student. For many of the participants, they tried to second guess what the selectors would be looking for. This ranged from clothing choices – one participant wore a suit, whilst another thought they would be unsuccessful because they wore jeans; to accents - 'If you've got two people… and one is from the North, they'd take the down South one because they sound like one of them'; to appearing stressful – 'they're looking for a sweet spot between relaxed and serious'; to a mirror image of the selector's themselves – 'they get students that they think they would want to teach.'

The anticipation of what to expect versus the reality was a difficult time for the students and again the STAR students felt there was a lack of transparency over what was expected and consequently felt at a disadvantage. Lacey had only ever had two interviews in her life (for her part-time job and sixth form college) and felt unprepared. Responding to how she felt about the interview process, Lacey stated:

> [Lacey] 'I wasn't sure what to expect. I was just sort of trying to talk about stuff that I knew, but I was also scared of like looking too keen… Or looking like… I felt like I knew the whole subject when I didn't.'

The actual reality for the participants that did get an interview was equally disappointing with many of the students feeling deflated about the process when asked how the interview experience was:

> [Aaliyah] 'They didn't ask anything on my personal statement and I was annoyed because I had a whole thing prepared. I was so excited to talk about my EPQ [Extended Project Qualification] and it didn't come up.'

> [Wanisha] 'The first one was horrible it just went so fast and like. When you've like known every answer to everything, your entire high school career, in your entire [sixth form] college career, when they ask you something you don't know you're like…. Literally, "freeze" it's like, "this question I don't know the answer…." Ermmm…"That really threw me off"…It was just things I never would have thought of and then they had to give me a lot of clues and I did get the right answer eventually, but it took me a while…'

Indeed, some participants found it difficult to comprehend that the interviewers were not interested in them as people or in their passion for the subject, instead just going straight into problem based academic questions. For a few of the STAR students this was their first 'contact' with Oxbridge, having had no interaction with Oxbridge due to lockdown and so to go straight into what they perceived as hard questioning felt surprising and cold.

All participants tried to be as 'academic' and confident as they could during their interviews and felt it was the responsibility of the applicant to meet the threshold of what was expected of a 'typical Oxbridge student' despite not fully knowing what this was. This was the case with Vance when asked about his interview experience:

> [Vance] 'You've got... [to be] able to cope with that system and if you if you can't, then that's probably not the place... place to go.'

Such ideas of speaking academically and with confidence during an interview, left some students feeling like they were at a disadvantage compared with students in the private sector. When asked how his application would fare against other students, Eddie felt being at a state sixth form college was a disadvantage:

> [Eddie] 'From primary school they'll be in a private school obviously preparing them to go to Oxford and having all sorts of extra-curricular... [doing] Latin for some reason. It's coz they've obviously had a lot more prep [preparation], but I feel like they often feel more entitled to a place at Oxbridge.'

Thus, for the STAR students, despite mock interviews at college and immense preparation, the expectation versus the reality of an Oxbridge interview was not congruent. Moreover, there persisted an air of mystery and lack of clarity regarding what to expect and into that void crept persistent myths based on social class and Oxbridge stereotypes. This in turn was exacerbated by the shift to online interviews that seemed to disadvantage students who had had no prior contact with Oxbridge.

Acceptance and rejection

By the end of December, the Oxbridge application process is over for the students and they wait until mid-January when they find out if they have been successful or not in securing an offer. Of the participants who were interviewed for this research:

- 3 gained a place at Oxbridge and started university there the following October
- 1 gained a place but did not get the A-level grades to take up the offer so went to their second-choice university
- 7 were rejected but secured places at other universities
- 1 gained a place but declined it, choosing to attend a different university.

For the successful applicants this was a proud moment when the gravity and reality of what they had achieved set in. Responding to the question of how she felt when she learned that she had gained a place, Charlene was ecstatic:

> [Charlene] 'I just kinda like ran around the house very excited…It's not a fantasy anymore…I just thought "I'm sorted for life".'

For all the participants who gained an offer, there was consistent sense of surprise as well as a sense of achievement at being one of the few people to achieve the 'prize' (Mounford-Zimdars 2016) of an offer after a long and gruelling selection process. Yet even in the euphoric moments, because of the unclear acceptance criteria, some still questioned whether it was because they truly deserved it or whether it was because they met a diversity target? When asked about her experience of being offered a place, Cacey was hesitant:

> [Cacey] 'Was it.... shouldn't have been given to me sort of thing but like.....or they they've given it to me to fit into a... tick a criteria box of all "we've got this many poor kids going." That's how it felt. I mean, obviously I didn't know if that was why… I was given it or you know or "we need a few more women on the science like cohort... Let's give it to her" you know "she ticks a couple boxes of meeting these percentages." That's how it felt. I mean obviously might not be... you never find out why you get given one you know… they never say "we really liked you because of this" maybe that be nice to know as well.'

Cacey received an offer for Oxbridge of A*A*A but regrettably 'only' achieved A*AA. Throughout the process, Cacey was always wary that she may have been a tokenistic applicant from a low-income background who got on to widening participation programmes because, in her words, 'she ticked a diversity box'. She felt she was supported by Oxbridge in terms of getting to a position to apply but did not feel the support once she was given an offer. Cacey opted to attend the university closest to her home and continued to live at home throughout her

studies (Reay et al 2005). Some of the participants felt a fairer system would be to have post-results applications or a more nuanced approach if a student dropped one particular grade. For Cacey, the difference between being 'Oxbridge material' and not was the difference between a grade A and A* - a fine margin that a lot of the participants felt would be the worst outcome for them when considering the possibilities of the application process. She reflected on how she missed out on a place at Oxbridge to read Chemistry when asked about her experience:

> [Cacey] 'I think it was just a bad exam, you know sometimes that just happens unfortunately like and it was just unfortunate it was maths... I sort of accepted my fate and that was fine. Like I was fine with that...but it was just I thought well... I'm not meant to go there and that's fine as well.'

This notion of 'fate' or chance or luck was a recurring theme within the experience of the STAR Oxbridge applicants signalling a sense of luck or being plucked from obscurity during the process. Equally there was the notion of acquiescence that that was the system and nothing else could be done but to accept the situation.

Similarly, for the unsuccessful students, it could be quite a bruising experience. Jo felt a sense of mixed messages from Oxbridge and a feeling like she had been used by the institution. Because she had been such a willing participant on one of the Outreach programmes, she had been made an ambassador to promote Oxbridge widening participation – she did not gain an interview for Oxbridge and found out hours before she gave a speech on behalf of the programme. Talking about her experience at not being invited for interview:

> [Jo] 'Yeah, so on the day I got rejected I was on a train, literally at the train station on the way to do a speech about access to Oxbridge, which is slightly ironic, but it's not even slightly ironic. It's very ironic, but um. Yeah, so I thought....but I still did it because that's the sort of person I am is just sort of. Yeah, um... and it was it was like it was... It wasn't even to like students. It was to people like Oxbridge professors. Ex... You know people like that and I held my way through the speech which.... I don't even like speeches but I got my way through it. I was a bit shaky and I was like moving back and forth a lot, you know, because I was really nervous...um.. and then I cried after excessively because... the other two people that did speeches that day had got interviews and I hadn't.'

Jo felt compelled to be an Oxbridge ambassador as this was her way of making connections that could prove fruitful in trying to secure a place at the institution. From Oxbridge's perspective, the WP programme and the admissions departments are entirely separate entities, however to an 18-year-old student who had no experience of university systems and processes, this distinction was lost. Instead, Jo was recruited to promote an Access programme to Oxbridge, from which she did not gain the ultimate access of a place at the institution. She did not know why she did not gain an interview and for her and others, this lack of transparency within the admissions process continues even to the very end of the process. This was encapsulated by Aaliyah's reflection on her unsuccessful application:

> [Aaliyah] 'Yes, I don't know why I didn't get in, but then again, I'm okay with it. I'm ok…I've come to terms with it.'

The whole notion of 'coming to terms' was akin to language used when confronted with a bereavement, except this student did not know how her application had 'died' and blamed herself. When success criteria was obscured or feedback from the process was generic (some Oxbridge colleges write to applicant's schools/sixth form college giving general admissions feedback for the particular cohort), Aaliyah felt the only reason left to explain her rejection was her poor performance and this was a common sentiment amongst the unsuccessful applicants.

Finally, falling between acceptance and rejection was the student who gained a place but rejected Oxbridge. Darren was an interesting respondent who gained a place at Oxbridge but rejected them in favour of a place at a different Russell Group university. For him he did not feel like he would fit in at Oxbridge (Reay et al 2005) and despite considering the perceived opportunities an Oxbridge degree would bring, felt it was not the right place:

> [Darren] 'Thinking about it, I've just kind of wracked in my brain. Coz I remember going on the interview days and speaking to all these people. And you know, in their very posh accent, "Oh I'm from Kent" and all these really, really posh people and me kind of feeling quite detached from that, you know, not having experienced anything like that before…and kind of thinking. "Am I going to get along with these people? "And.. and then thinking about Eastleigh [pseudonym for Russell Group University] kind of, you know, I remember speaking to people on the their interview day and

they were just normal people and I don't think it felt like that at Oxbridge. It felt kind of, you know, elitist. Which is strange, because that's what it was, and that's what appealed to me.'

For Darren it was an agonising decision – he had bought into the notion of what an Oxbridge degree could do (Montacute and Cullinane 2018) and was given the opportunity but could not see himself fitting in. This was not helped by the feeling of isolation he had – from the outset of the Oxbridge application, the only contact he had with his Oxbridge college was his interview, whereas Eastleigh University contacted him regularly via email and on social media, offering him support and taster sessions at the university. Although this may have been a marketing ploy by Eastleigh, for Darren it created a connection and a sense of being nurtured that he felt was symptomatic of the university and a feeling he perceived he would not have got at Oxbridge.

When all the applicants that were interviewed looked back and reflected on the Oxbridge application process there was a profound sense that they knew they were taking part in a process in which the chances were that they would be unsuccessful. Some felt that they would have had more of an advantage if they had gone to private school as they perceived that strategies to be successful and support for the Oxbridge Application Process were taught there from a young age. However, their sensitivity to this was heightened by exposure to events during the pandemic. To put in context, for the majority of the STAR students this was the year group who had been through the lockdowns of the pandemic of 2020 and witnessed how Centre Assessed Grades replaced A-level Examinations that were allocated by an Ofqual algorithm that favoured private school candidates (Weale 2020). This therefore put them on edge and made their senses heightened to how differences between state and private schools would be graded when they sat their exams. When asked about if they thought the process was fair, Lacey was unequivocal:

> [Lacey] 'And like especially with everything that's gone in the last year, different schools have different levels of support. even if we sit exams... the grading system has not been the best.... whoever has had the best support gets the best grades. But I think they're also looking at this year how well you would have done during lockdown so people from richer areas who went to grammar schools who can afford private tutors. They got better

support during the lockdown, they're gonna get the higher grades this summer either way and people from all like areas like us can't guarantee them grades because of the situation.'

In a sense, the participants consistently felt that the Oxbridge application system was flawed against them, but this was exacerbated by the extremes that were felt throughout the pandemic. As 18-year-old applicants, who have had little interaction or experience with the institutions of Oxbridge, they felt that they just had to go along with the system that was in place. There was a sense of helplessness but also a resignation that this was the only way. When asked if the they thought the process was fair, they replied:

[Wanisha] 'I don't think it's good but I don't know how it could be better.'

[Eddie] 'I wouldn't say it's necessarily fair, but I'm not sure what steps you really take.'

In not knowing the complete success criteria, coming from a state school background and dealing with the inequalities intensified by Covid-19, it was no surprise that the language used to sum up their prospects of success or failure in applying to Oxbridge was often couched in luck or fate. However, this was not a 50/50-coin toss, rather their experience was one of feeling lucky if they got their 'gold dust' place at Oxbridge and being solely responsible if they did not.

Therefore, this findings section has explored the experience of the Oxbridge application process for high achieving Sixth Form students from deciding to apply through to the final outcome of the process. In particular it has raised key themes surrounding notions of transparency and responsibility and this will now be discussed in relation to Bourdieusian field theory.

Discussion

Having looked at the experience of the STAR students and how they felt at each stage of the Oxbridge application process it is now possible to theorise and discuss some of the findings utilising the Bourdieusian toolbox outlined in chapter 3. In using a Bourdieusian analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104-7) I will first map

out the sub-field that my findings have highlighted, demonstrating the structure of relations between the positions occupied by particular agents before analysing the habitus of particular agents and narrowing down on specific themes, most notably the issues surrounding understanding of the process, transparency of success in the process and the disruption caused by moving online.

Understanding the sub-field of the Oxbridge application system

In considering the field of education in a Bourdieusian sense, the Oxbridge application Process could be considered a sub-field in which the key agents identified from my research would be the Oxbridge admissions tutors, the STAR Manager (myself) and the STAR student applicants themselves (Figure 2). In recognising this sub-field as a contested space (Thompson 2014), there was a struggle between the agents over entrance to Oxbridge. For the applicants this was a struggle with one another to gain entry into an elite institution and the promise of potential higher cultural, social and ultimately economic capital, an Oxbridge degree may bring (Montacute and Cullinane 2018). But there was also a struggle to convince Oxbridge admissions tutors (and to a lesser extent, the STAR Manager) that they have the appropriate qualities and academic grades as well as various capitals and dispositions to be considered 'Oxbridge material'. For the Oxbridge admissions tutors there was the struggle over making sure that admission to Oxbridge was tightly controlled through the various stages of the application process (Mountford-Zimdars 2016) to ensure standards were maintained that only 'Oxbridge material' students were given places – maintaining the institutions' elite status. For myself, the STAR Manager, there was the struggle to support students in gaining entry to Oxbridge as in doing so, not only for reasons outlined regarding what an Oxbridge degree may bring to the individual students, but also because what a successful application would do in terms of prestige and measurable success for myself, the STAR programme and Northwest Sixth Form College and thus contributing to the 'success' doxa that is desired at the sixth form college (this is expanded upon in the next chapter). Put simply, all agents in this sub-field wanted

sixth form students to be successful in their Oxbridge application – the question of who, how, and how many remained different for each agent. The over-riding doxa (Bourdieu 1977) of this sub-field was the shared understanding of the mechanisms that made up a successful Oxbridge application – thus there was a taken-for-granted assumption that a personal statement, entrance examination and interview(s) all achieved at the highest standard would result in entry to Oxbridge. As will be argued later, this was perhaps an example of misrecognition as the experience of the STAR students shows this not to be the case.

Figure 2: Sub-field of Oxbridge Application Process with constituent agents and prevailing doxa
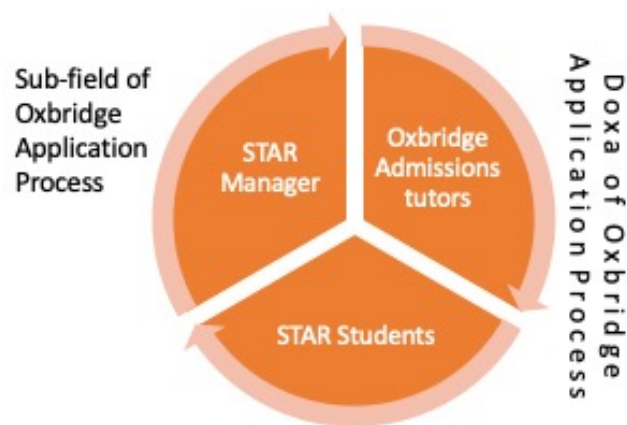
When considering the different positions that the agents of the sub-field of the Oxbridge application system occupied, it was possible to identify some sense of the levels of capital they may have possessed. For the Oxbridge Admissions tutors, they were the gatekeepers to the elite universities and conceivably held the power in this struggle and competition to gain a place. Many of the admissions tutors were part of the academic staff within the Oxbridge colleges and so we could presume that they had high social capital in terms of their connections within the Oxbridge community, high cultural capital in terms of exposure to specific knowledge and pursuits and a certain level of economic capital commensurate with their position (Hunter 2017). In addition, their status as gatekeepers operating a strict access policy to the elite universities also retained a great deal of symbolic capital and so in the dynamics at play within this sub-field, it was the admissions tutors who were the key decision makers and held dominance. For myself, the STAR Manager within

this process, there were certain levels of capital – most notably from being university educated, having been through the Oxbridge application process as a student and having accrued certain knowledge of the process as part of my role (this will be discussed further in the next chapter) and this knowledge was disseminated amongst the sixth form students. The sixth form students on the other hand, held little power within this space, occupying a position with considerably lower capitals than the admissions tutors and myself as STAR Manager. The STAR students were desiring a resource (entry to Oxbridge) that was within the gift of the admission tutors and it was the often-invisible struggle between students that was central to their experience of the process. If capital 'oils the wheels of social mechanisms' (Grenfell 2014a: 266) then the following sections will argue that it was the accumulation or dwindling of capital that was exhibited by the students that shaped and determined their success or failure and how this was manifested through the different stages of the process.

Student understanding of the rules of the game

A common thread throughout the findings was the notion that the participants entered into the Oxbridge application process with their eyes wide open (or at least partially so) to an experience in which their chances of being unsuccessful was very high. It was evident that their habitus had been shaped by both first- and second-hand experiences and interactions with Oxbridge and this had shaped how they viewed the sub-field of the application system and the prevailing doxa. This can be seen in the various myths surrounding the application process balanced against the golden opportunity that an Oxbridge degree would bring. From the outset, the mystery that pervaded Oxbridge demonstrated by Charlene's quote that 'it might as well be in China' suggests a doxic culture of the exotic (Said 1979) – a sense of being other-worldly or a least not part of Charlene's usual sphere of the world, tinged with a sense of unobtainability – both geographically and also academic and culturally. The STAR students demonstrated a good understanding of why they wanted to take part in applying to Oxbridge and Vance's comment about how an

Oxbridge degree would give him both the 'weight' and 'connections' to secure good employment confirmed his perception of the rewards in terms of cultural, social and ultimately economic capital, an Oxbridge degree could bring.

The rumours (not unfounded – Montacute and Cullinane 2018) of private school students having more of an advantage added to this feeling of the odds being stacked against them and this was further exacerbated by the very public knowledge of how Centre Assessed Grades had favoured private school candidates when examinations had been cancelled in the Summer of 2020 (Weale 2020). It was therefore interesting to see how the STAR students tried to increase their capital whenever an opportunity presented itself. This was shown during the interview process with many of the students concerned and worried about their own symbolic capital that they perceived would showcase their low cultural capital. One student worried about what to wear before opting for a suit, Charlene fretted about wearing jeans and a number of students felt their Northern accents and the fact that they 'wouldn't be like them' would disadvantage them. In Bourdieusian terms, such dispositions are indicative of a habitus that comprises of low forms of capital and in the struggle for the prize of a place at Oxbridge, the meagre scraps of opportunities to raise one's capital can be significant events. This was illustrated by two key incidents during the research that I would argue, perhaps constitute symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977: 67):

The incident involving Vidal's need for an electronic tablet for his online interview is a pertinent example of the power dynamics at play within the sub-field of the Oxbridge Admissions process and crystallizes the student perception of how the accumulation or shedding of capital affects one's chances of success in the process. Like other students, Vidal spoke of the difficulties for him of an online interview due to the pandemic, stating how it felt impersonal and was the first 'contact' he had had with Oxbridge. He then was presented with an email sent from his prospective Oxbridge college several days before his interview that he would require an electronic tablet in order to be able to show his working out. The remainder of his preparation was spent worrying about how to acquire one and then agonising how other students would be advantaged because they (in his eyes) presumably had one

and he didn't. In a Bourdieusian sense, the practice displayed by the admissions tutors was perhaps based on an assumption that every 18-year-old has a touch screen device, such was their understanding and reading of the sub-field. There is a misrecognition that this is 'natural' and in an analysis of the sub-field, in this example, it is structured to benefit students who have more economic capital – whose families or guardians can afford an electronic tablet.

The inappropriate fit between the habitus displayed by Vidal and the sub-field of the Oxbridge Admissions process could be considered an act of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977: 67). Vidal misrecognised what he understood as the 'natural' format of the interview and what 'everyone else would be doing'. He felt that it was imperative to have a touch screen device and did not fully know the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu (1990: 66) that a simple whiteboard and marker would suffice. Moreover, from his perspective, the blame or fault rested with him and so his perception was that he had lower cultural and economic capital going into the interview resulting in low confidence and possibly a poorer interview performance than might have been. Vidal was not successful in gaining a place at Oxbridge. To put his rejection all down to this incident of symbolic violence is something which remains unproven, however his misrecognition of the prevailing doxa to be replaced by feelings of inadequacy and anxiety could undoubtedly be a contributory factor. It is hard to 'win' a game when you don't fully know the rules. Vidal had absorbed this symbolic domination 'like air' (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992e: 115) and accepted the circumstances in a 'resigned passivity' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 93).

Secondly, the incident regarding the chain of events experienced by Jo underlined how she had come to understand the part of the prevailing doxa of the sub-field of the Admissions process and how she was doing everything possible to increase her chances through the perceived accumulation of capital. Jo decided to grasp the opportunity of increasing her social and cultural capital through becoming an Oxbridge ambassador for a Widening Participation scheme. This involved extolling the virtues of the scheme at various events and it could be considered that her habitus indicated that this would be a good opportunity as already she had enjoyed

some success on the programme demonstrated by her comments on how amazing it was that an Oxbridge professor 'believed in her'. Thus, for Jo, this was an easy decision and another opportunity to increase her social and cultural capital to navigate the sub-field of the Admissions process in an enhanced way. However, Jo misrecognised the interactions within the sub-field and found there was no correlation with 'doing Oxbridge a good turn' and increasing her own social capital with the institution. In having clear success criteria withheld from her as to what would improve her likelihood of success, Jo took a chance to try and make a difference for herself through taking up such a position. Moreover, one can only wonder the time and preparation needed to take on such a role and the detriment and impact this would have had on her academic studies. Described by some as no less 'gentler' than physical violence (Schubert 2014: 181), this act of symbolic violence occurred because the prevailing attitude of the institution was to maintain the illusion of widening participation. Indeed, the timing of her rejection (just before she gave a speech to professors about Access to Oxbridge), the way Jo carried on and her subsequent descent into being distraught shows something of the character of Jo, her professionalism, going the extra mile and a demonstration of passion for a place – qualities that one would argue, would make an excellent student at an elite institution (were they to publish such criteria).

Thus, we can potentially see that for some of the STAR students who were part of this research there is a partial understanding that the Oxbridge Application Process is skewed not in their favour. In trying to increase certain capitals, they are doing everything they can to give themselves the best chance but cannot see their own misrecognition of the prevailing doxa and the flawed mechanisms within the process. This is further illustrated by the lack of transparency and opaque success criteria of what makes a successful application, and this will now be explored.

Lack of transparency

A key feature of the research and findings was to document each stage of the Oxbridge application process in a bid to understand student experience and the

decisions they made along the way. As has been demonstrated, STAR students did show some understanding that they felt the process was stacked against them and did everything within their capabilities to try and improve their chances. This was further hindered by a lack of clarity of what was expected of them and what exactly Oxbridge were looking for. As has been shown in the discussion of the first research question, the STAR students had led a life thus far of pressure, grades and certainties of meeting thresholds. For many, their whole identity was wrapped up in the external validation of high attainment – therefore to withhold or obscure the success criteria for the grandest prize of all (a place at Oxbridge) was both alien to them and discombobulating, and from a Bourdieusian perspective, could be considered an act of symbolic violence.

At each stage of the Oxbridge application process there was obscuration and a lack of clarity into which the participants were left guessing as to how to be successful, with powerful myths taking hold, further undermining the confidence of the students. This could be seen at the start with the writing of the personal statement. A number of students did now know what Oxbridge were looking for or the weighting within which Oxbridge admissions tutors placed on the personal statement. Within the sub-field of the Oxbridge admissions process, students had little social or cultural capital to draw on. They did not have family members or friends who had successfully been through the process nor did they have the support of such people to find a way through. In fact, they felt isolated and disadvantaged from the outset, an element that was acknowledged by a number of students. To date (2023), there is no exemplar personal statement material or a list of success criteria as to what constitutes a 'good' personal statement, rather some generic advice on the official websites which the STAR students did not find helpful. Thus, in the struggles for resources in the sub-field of the application process, students are left scrabbling, pursuing a habitus of what has worked well previously for them, namely listing academic skills and discussing academic literature they have read. That is not to say they are completely isolated, the STAR programme provided help, support and proof-reading throughout the drafting process, but similarly this was based on what I myself as STAR Manager *thought* Oxbridge

wanted to see, not what was known (this will be looked at in more details in the next chapter). As Mountford-Zimdars (2016) illustrates, the quality of such an application mechanism varies immensely (particularly in the higher quality exhibited from private school students) but from the beginning there is a mystery surrounding what students need to do to be successful.

The findings also revealed a high level of obscuration in terms of the entrance examination. Both Cacey and Vance in the findings raised the prospect of wanting to know what Oxbridge were looking for and how the result of the examination was weighted. All the participants did not fully know how to prepare, what the 'pass mark' was or how it would be marked. For students who had spent two years preparing for both GCSE's and A-levels, this was a disconcerting experience, exacerbated by the small timescale of preparation which was two to three weeks (the time between sending off their UCAS application on the 16th October and sitting the examination at the end of October/early November). Moreover, from my own reflections, it was evident that I (as STAR manager) was complicit in this, viewing the entrance examination and subsequent preparation as an opportunity for students to demonstrate rigour and flare and an indication that this was part of the selection process for Oxbridge, that if applicants were truly capable, they would find a way through. The reality based on the student experience in the research was not the case. Students felt an acute sense of responsibility that the outcome of the examination was down to them alone, and indeed the minimal support from myself, as STAR manager, merely confirmed that. There was a physical struggle for actual resources displayed by the STAR students in trying to ascertain what was expected of them.

For every other examination they had prepared for, they have had the intuition to research past questions, read examiners reports and be taught over a period of 2 years, the inner workings of how to perform well in an examination. For the Oxbridge entrance examination, at best they were presented with several past papers and mark schemes with no understanding of how it was applied nor what the syllabus or scheme of work was for their particular subject. In this respect, the habitus demonstrated by the STAR students was to resort to the prior knowledge of

what they have been previously taught for GCSE and A-Level. The prevailing doxa within the sub-field relating to this mechanism of admission therefore was one of 'if you are good enough, you will know what to do.' Oxbridge often talks about using the examination to assess student 'potentiality' in a 'holistic way' (St John's College 2023) when in fact it was assessing how well students had been trained for the exam, and in this respect many of the STAR students felt they came up short. This could be considered an act of symbolic violence, potentially revealing the mismatch between student habitus and the doxa of the sub-field, with the STAR students feeling that it was their responsibility. Indeed, Vance exemplified this when he argued that examinations as a measure of entry were 'cut and dry' – every other examination he had sat showed him where he was up to with his learning. From this experience, the Oxbridge examination should do the same – however the difference being that he did not have success criteria or the tools to give it his best shot.

Similarly, the findings for the interview process showed a lack of transparency in what was expected of the sixth form students. As has already been discussed, students took it upon themselves to try and increase their perceived capital through the way they dressed or the way they spoke. Tellingly, the interview experiences were often slightly different from subject to subject and between the different Oxbridge colleges. This ranged from number of interviews (1 to 3), format of interviews (all were online, but some required extra equipment such as an electronic tablet), to content of interviews (some drew on the personal statement, others were just problem solving questions). Whilst some would argue that an interview has to have an element of surprise in order to facilitate selection (St John's College 2023) – this is not always the case with examples of some Russell Group universities emailing prospective candidates in subjects such as medicine the questions and topic areas that will be covered during the interview (Sheffield University Medical School 2022). The findings suggest the withholding of the success criteria regarding what made a 'good' interview made preparation difficult for the STAR students. Some subjects and colleges at Oxbridge provide a video of what to expect at interview, however, this is very inconsistent (In 2023 there are some generic interviews but not every subject is catered for and this was less of the

case when the research was conducted in 2020/21). Whilst each Oxbridge applicant was given 2-3 'mock' interviews, feedback from the students indicated that these at times mirrored the questions in the actual interview but at other times were wildly off the mark. Students approached the interviews trying to second-guess what to know and yet again felt responsible for their success or failure. In the struggle for the resources within the subfield of the Oxbridge Application Process, 'knowing' how the system works was paramount and those students who had higher social, cultural and economic capital – the students who had family or friends who had been through the process, who attended schools that had a long and rich history of sending students to Oxbridge institutions – these were the ones who truly understood the rules of the game and exploited such capital to a greater extent. For the STAR students in this study, such possession of capital was perhaps minimal leaving the majority unsuccessful in their endeavours to gain a place.

Finally, the lack of transparency theme demonstrated throughout the Oxbridge Application Process was decisively shown at the very end of the process. The notification of success or failure at Oxbridge was usually indicated by an email from the Oxbridge College and an update on a student's online UCAS application. The email was generic, giving generalities of the competitiveness of the process and congratulations/commiserations. Unsuccessful students were then told they could ask for feedback via their referee (myself) which was sent to me about three months later and typically lacked specifics and gave little understanding as to why they may have been unsuccessful. Indeed, the findings section saw Aaliyah not knowing why she had been rejected and likened her experience to a bereavement. For many of the STAR students operating at their highest academic level, 'failure' was often a new experience that was difficult to handle and led to a period of introversion and self-blame.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the students had bought into the prevailing doxa that a successful application came from completing each element of the process to the highest standard. However, in having the 'rules of the game' partially withheld – not knowing the success criteria and not being able to gain meaningful feedback – left some of the participants blaming themselves and could be considered an act of

symbolic violence. If Oxbridge institutions considered their own position within the sub-field and were serious about access to their places of education, then surely a more sensitive and informative process could be in place to support such individuals? Indeed, such insensitivity and lack of care was pivotal in Darren's decision to 'reject' his Oxbridge place. Had Oxbridge followed up his place and maintained contact, Darren may have felt less isolated and like he would not 'fit in' at Oxbridge. As Bourdieu and Passerson (1979: 38) reflect: 'to want to be, and to want to choose one's identity, is, first of all, to refuse to be what one has not chosen to be'. As such, the most rational thing to do in the words of Darren was to reject them, perhaps indicating a habitus, informed by previous experience that he would be better to attend an institution consisting of students who were 'more like him' than go it alone at an elite institution that he perceived did not care for him. Such was the lack of transparency throughout the whole process, that even for some of the applicants who were successfully offered a place, there was an inquisitive paranoia as to why and how they were successful? This was evident in Cacey's reaction, questioning if she had only been given a place because she 'ticked a diversity box' perhaps indicating a habitus derived from her negative experiences of her contact with Oxbridge.

Thus, from start to finish, the lack of transparency shown in the Oxbridge Application Process was a significant feature of STAR students' experience. At each stage, students were disadvantaged through by what could be considered in Bourdieusian terms as acts of symbolic violence, revealing a diminished level of capital that hindered (often considerably) their capacity to succeed in the contested sub-field of the Oxbridge Application Process. Such was the obscuration, that even when applicants were successful in gaining a place, they saw their success as 'tokenistic' or were put off by the process and opted for (in their eyes) a more rational option. The final element of this process will now be discussed in how moving online affected the experience of the Oxbridge Application Process.

The hysteresis of moving online

Finally, the findings demonstrated that the impact of the pandemic and subsequent move online had a serious impact on the STAR students and changed the dynamics of the sub-field of the Oxbridge Application process. The research established that the participants felt that in-person programmes were beneficial and for many this was their first 'contact' with Oxbridge as a place and as a site of learning. Of most benefit were the sustained Outreach programmes that offered a series of tutorials, lectures and experiences with Oxbridge over the course of a year and was exhibited by Jo as 'opening Oxbridge up as a place to go.' Whilst the findings did indicate some of the tension and backlash that did occur particularly within their own peer groups, there was a resounding feeling amongst the participants who had applied to Oxbridge pre-pandemic and hence been part of an 'in-person' WP programme, had clearly benefitted and felt more confident and comfortable making an application to Oxbridge. Thus, the move to online access programmes, open days and ultimately interviews meant that early contact and demystifying of Oxbridge was minimised. Hence, many of the participants complained about sub-standard experience of the online WP programmes and some had negative experiences during online interviews.

In the struggle over resources in the sub-field of the Oxbridge Application Process, the STAR students perhaps experienced a hysteresis of habitus from the profound change in the field setting caused by the pandemic. Attending an in-person WP programme would have given them a 'feel for the game' and presumably an opportunity to accrue social and cultural capital in their experiences with Oxbridge. It could be suggested that in the dramatic shift to online there was a lag in how their habitus adapted – they were no longer active participants engaged in an interactive WP programme, but in fact had become passive participants on a Zoom call. This affected their geographic and physical sense of Oxbridge as well as their mental understanding and motivation required to be successful, changing their position in the sub-field of the application process with a diminishment of cultural capital. Having no other experience of Oxbridge to draw back on, the participants detailed

how they felt that this shift was detrimental to their application. Moreover, many students felt the switch to online interviews meant they did not 'up their game' as they hoped that attending an Oxbridge college may induce. For many, they felt they had little or no cultural or social capital invested with Oxbridge and this was to their disadvantage. Thus, there was also a shock by some that the admissions tutors did not want to get to 'know them' during the interview. The hysteresis in the lagged adaptation was also evident in to not even knowing how to effectively prepare themselves for this adaptation ranging from what should be on the background on screen (some participants talked of making their bed and putting up a poster of the Periodic table) to whether it would be appropriate to put post-it notes around their screen. As was evident in Chapter 5, the move to online significantly affected the STAR students in a negative way and this was also the case during the Oxbridge application process.

The decision-making process

Although decision-making and how STAR students came to make particular decisions has been implicit throughout this discussion section, it is worth explicitly highlighting some critical moments, to fully address my third research question. In particular, the findings revealed the delicate nature of how these high achieving students even came to consider applying and began to think of themselves as 'Oxbridge material' (Stubbs and Murphy 2020). In the findings, this was often a slow process and was evident in three ways: through the influence of a teacher, the experience of a Widening Participation programme or the influence of the STAR programme. For almost all of the participants, this decision to apply was rarely encouraged or talked about at home and much like Reay, David and Ball (2005), for some students such as Lauren, the pull to stay at home was very strong. From a Bourdieusian perspective, Reay et al (2005: 92) saw such decision making as a process of 'class-matching … between student and university; a synchronisation of familial and institutional habitus'. Indeed, as detailed above, the absence of in-person WP programmes and switch to online, proved significant for some

participants, and led to a diminishment of social and cultural capital and perhaps a more hesitant or ambivalent habitus in deciding to apply. Some participants indicated how even the decision to apply had been almost made for them such was the institutional culture (Donnelly 2014) and this was the case for Charlene as she became swept up in the institutional habitus of the STAR programme and found it easier to apply than to resist (this is further discussed in chapter 7).

Perhaps what is most striking about decision making throughout the whole Oxbridge application process is the relative lack of decisions that are actually made beyond making the decision to apply. The findings often revealed an acquiescence with the process that was rarely challenged and was just the 'way things were' – this was evident for both the students and for myself as STAR Manager. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the sense of autonomy or lack of is a fundamental part of a sub-field and it was clear that for the STAR students, when entering the sub-field of the application process, they were clearly adhering to some form of 'rules of the game' with little scope to fully know, or even question the social practice of this sub-field. As has been documented throughout this chapter, each stage of the process has had a level of obscuration to which those students with already low levels of capital felt disadvantaged and out of their depth. It was therefore interesting to see the (over)emphasis placed by the participants on the very minor decisions that they had to make during the process. Issues such as clothing choice for an interview were perhaps the only glimpse of autonomy they had in their eyes and perhaps the only chance to increase their capitals and improve their overall field position to gain a place at Oxbridge.

Summary – the 'gamble' of the Oxbridge Applications Process

From start to finish, from deciding to apply to the end result, it has been suggested that the student experience of the Oxbridge Application System was one of striving to take part in a rigged process in which they were unlikely to be the beneficiaries but still aspire to gain a place at these elite institutions. At each stage of the process, valuable success criteria was withheld making the process opaque and lacking

transparency – an environment in which those that possessed more social, cultural and economic capital could see a little clearer and improve their chances.

It is therefore no surprise the language couched in terms of applying to Oxbridge was one of luck: 'a gamble', 'a wildcard.' These were not the certainties of achieving high grades, getting 90+% in tests or following the simple formula that a plus b must equal c. In the prevailing doxa of this sub-field there was a simple (misrecognised) formula that is if you are good enough you will get in - if you are considered 'Oxbridge material' then Oxbridge will consider you - and ultimately the responsibility of this rests with the individual student. Unfortunately, this misrecognition and potential act of symbolic violence clearly hindered the STAR students in their application. Their experience of applying to Oxbridge was an obscuration: lacking transparency and clarity at each stage of the process and leaving them low in confidence, hesitant underdogs who felt the full weight of responsibility in applying to what they saw as an arbitrary game of chance in which the odds were stacked against them. Moreover, the shift to online had only exacerbated these issues.

This research has intended to demonstrate the lived experience of high achieving students in their day to day life and also in going through the Oxbridge Application Process. The next chapter will look at the limitations of this research and in my own role in the process (Participant Objectivication) before the final chapter will draw together some conclusions and offer forth some recommendations for moving forward.

Chapter 7: Participant objectivication and limitations

Having discussed the findings from my research, this chapter will consider the Bourdieusian idea of participant objectivication (as discussed in chapter 3) in relation to being reflexive in my role as a researcher. It will begin with a reflection on my own position within the research and topic area, before questioning these assumptions using Bourdieusian analysis, particularly as an 'insider' researcher. This chapter will subsequently conclude with highlighting some of the limitations of my findings and the inherent methodology I have chosen.

Participant objectivication

As outlined in the methodology, a key component of using Bourdieu and his conceptual toolbox is for the researcher to remain reflexive and recognise their own role at every stage of the research process through participant objectivication (Bourdieu 2000: 10). In this respect, Bourdieu argued that a researcher should subject themselves to the same level of scrutiny and analysis as their own object of study with the tools available (such as field, capital and habitus). Indeed, to be continually reflexive was described as Bourdieu's 'signature obsession' (Wacquant 1992: 36) and it was Bourdieu's intention that pursuing such an agenda was the ideal way to do research:

> 'It fastens not upon the private person of the sociologist in her idiosyncratic intimacy but on the concatenations of acts and operations she effectuates as part of her work and on the collective unconscious inscribed in them. Far from encouraging narcissism and solipsism, epistemic reflexivity invites intellectuals to recognize and to work to neutralize the specific determinisms to which their innermost thoughts are subjected and it informs a conception of the craft of research designed to strengthen its epistemological moorings.'
>
> (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 46)

Indeed, what was once 'ignored, evaded, diminished" by most social scientists in the 1980's (Woolgar and Ashmore 1988: 2), reflexivity has become a multi-faceted concept that at its worst can become narcissistic monologues or authorship denial but at best can be a tool to 'assess researchers' knowledge claims in terms of

situated aspects of their social selves and reveal their (often hidden) doxic values and assumptions' (Maton 2003: 54). At its core, Bourdieu intended for a sophisticated analysis to take place of one's own position in any given field or sub-field – in doing so new insight can be gained on the object of study and the remainder of this section charts this process.

In subjecting myself and my role in the research to Bourdieusian analysis, as has already been partly articulated in Chapter 5 and 6, it was evident that I occupied the same sub-field space as my object of study, particular in terms of the sub-field of college and the Oxbridge admissions process, albeit with a different relationship and role. In these spaces, I was struggling for the same resource (high grades or Oxbridge entry) whilst also possessing higher levels of capital and perhaps a different perspective of the prevailing doxa. As outlined in my positionality in chapter 1, I am a degree educated middle aged white male who would consider himself middle class, employed by the college to pastorally look after high achieving sixth form students and to maximise equality of opportunity. Although I am not judged on results per se, the outward symbol and indicator of quality of the STAR programme is partly Oxbridge entrants and each year, successful applicants are highlighted on Northwest College's website and social media pages as well as being used as a marketing tool at various college events. In this sense there is symbolic capital for me, the STAR programme and the College, in terms of the number of successful Oxbridge applicants there are. It would also be pertinent to point out that I was brought up by a family who passionately believed and supported my education (indeed the very act of this research and associated doctoral qualification is a product of that) and thus I have a personal agenda in pursuing social justice and supporting equality of opportunity in supporting high achieving students and ultimately facilitating Oxbridge entrance. Therefore, although there is both a personal and professional interest (and this is important to be aware of and to highlight), it is still the same struggle for the same resources but perhaps with slightly differing motivations than the STAR students who were part of my object of study. Crucially, this awareness and this research has shone a light on my own practice and my own role and even my own taken for granted assumptions of the

prevailing doxa, in that I have been perhaps complicit in committing symbolic violence against my own students and a few critical incidents will now be further explored.

One significant moment that underlined my position within the sub-field occurred during an interview with Darren where we were discussing the Oxbridge application process and how decisions to apply occurred. Talking about his experience, Darren reflected:

> [Darren] 'Looking at it as a whole, I guess there probably are some inherent biases within that selection process, so whether you know... even for yourself, kind of looking at applicants and saying, "I think you should apply to Oxford or Cambridge" like from a really early on stage. You know with myself....you were really supportive from, you know, week one of me getting there [sixth form college]... kinda saying "oh yeah you can go" but whether there was kind of some subconscious bias from yourself... Obviously, that's a subconscious thing and I'm not accusing you of being sexist or racist or whatever else but...'

Of substantial note here is Darren's recognition of the field positions within the sub-fields of college and the Oxbridge application process and the power dynamics within that. Equally Darren understands how powerful teacher influence can be but also questions the fairness of that and whether I myself am exercising 'subconscious' bias in persuading certain individuals to apply or indeed not to apply. What qualifies me to metaphorically 'tap' one person on the shoulder and not another? This not only demonstrates the difference in power dynamic between myself and the high achieving student (I doubt were a fellow peer to suggest that he should apply to Oxbridge that it would have as much impact), but also underscores the fragility and responsibility of potentially arbitrary comments and encouragement being made. Whilst I would most definitely refute such claims of being discriminatory in terms of being either sexist or racist, both professionally and personally, it is perhaps indicative that Darren realises that the application system may be skewed or unjust but lays part of the blame on how the initial introduction to Oxbridge occurs instead of wider issues.

Secondly, as outlined in Chapter 5, the findings and discussion illustrated a sub-field of sixth form college in which a dominant doxa of the STAR programme prevailed

and was taken for granted and unquestioned. Speaking and acting as and on behalf of the STAR programme conveyed an institutional habitus (Reay 1998) where decisions were made that created and set the rules of the game for the STAR students within that sub-field. This ranged from the entry criteria, to advice and guidance to university application strategy. In many senses the dominant institutional habitus meant that the process of being part of the STAR programme mirrored the Oxbridge application process, with any failure (e.g. failure to gain a place at a particular university) deflected on to the student or the particular problem. Moreover, the findings also highlighted how the prevailing doxa drew attention and stoked a climate of difference across the Sixth form college so that the experience of STAR students was one where they had to employ strategies to repel negative comments or diminish the significance that they were identified as high achieving by the fact of being part of the STAR cohort. The process of participant objectivication illuminates the power differentials within this sub-field and the taken-for-granted strategies and practices that constitute the STAR doxa. High achieving students were not asked if they wanted to be part of the STAR programme, rather it was 'assumed' they would and on the basis of their GCSE score, they are automatically put on the programme and marked out as 'different'. Tellingly, one of the participants, Charlene, commented on how she felt 'swept along' by the programme and felt it was easier to apply to Oxbridge than resist. Such notions are indicative of an institutional habitus and culture in which much is assumed and not much is questioned, with much of that responsibility resting with me as STAR Manager. Indeed, in analysing my own social practice, it could perhaps be argued that I have been complicit in significantly contributing to a doxa that places high value on (Russell Group) university entry with Oxbridge entry seen as the pinnacle of this. Whilst there may be debate as to whether this is the right form of aspiration to have, of vital significance for the STAR students, was the fact that there was little room to question this and not much space to opt out. Through being reflexive therefore, I was able to understand this process more and make recommendations in the final chapter to try and address this.

Thirdly – in the sub-field of the Oxbridge application process, the findings and discussion in chapter 6 revealed a system that was opaque and lacking clarity at every stage of the process. The prevailing doxa of the system was that the lack of specifics and fuzziness surrounding the success criteria was part of the 'test' in trying to locate which candidates had what it took to be 'Oxbridge material'. When assessing the sub-field, the research indicated that those who possessed low social and cultural capital particularly found it difficult as they had less access to the notion of what success looked like. Through participant objectivication I am able to locate myself within this sub-field and understand the habitus I displayed throughout the process. Crucially, I had bought into the prevailing doxa that the application system was designed to be robust and provide rigour so that the 'cream would rise to the top'. From my own research diary, I took an attitude that if students were genuinely serious of applying to Oxbridge then they would figure out a way to prepare properly for the entrance exams. Similarly, although students had been given a mock interview, they had not been told how to prepare or how it would be – the responsibility and expectation was entirely placed on them in a bid to 'prove' they were Oxbridge material. In being reflexive, I was able to see my own role as STAR manager and the enacted institutional habitus. In this way I had perhaps taken for granted the application process which the findings have potentially shown systematically disadvantage certain STAR students who lack the appropriate capitals to have any significant chance of success at each stage of the process. Such misrecognition on my part perhaps contributed to the over-riding doxa of 'becoming Oxbridge material' and instead of being an advocate for the STAR students and supporting them through the stages, I conceivably contributed to and at the very least did not help in removing the obscurity from the process. Thus, in reflecting and understanding my own social practice and position within the sub-field of the Oxbridge application process I intend to address this issue in the final recommendations chapter.

Therefore, through the reflexive process of participant objectivication, I have been able to place myself within the various sub-fields and through using the Bourdieusian conceptual tools, have provide an analysis of myself as an agent. This

chapter will now conclude with an assessment of the limitations of this study before concluding in the final chapter.

Limitations

Having therefore outlined my own position and reflexively engaged in how I am situated in my own research through participant objectivication, before concluding and making recommendations, I am able to outline some of the limitations of the research that have arisen.

Firstly, it was clear that Bourdieu's 'toolkit' featured prominently in my analysis and the use of field theory to map agent's positions and assess power dynamics using capital has been central to my arguments in terms of the lived experience of high achieving students and understanding their habitus during the Oxbridge Application process and making decisions. Moreover, the use of other Bourdieusian concepts has produced a richer exploration of this lived experience, such as the application of hysteresis to the switch to online learning and Oxbridge interviews or the notion of symbolic violence when considering how high achieving students engage with the Oxbridge Application system. Whilst chapter 3 outlined the reasons for using the work of Bourdieu and how they were most appropriate for answering my research questions, had I applied a different theoretical lens, it is conceivable that an entirely different form of analysis and conclusions could be drawn. For example, had analysis been conducted using Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005), entirely different conclusions could be drawn on the relationships of the object of study. That said I am confident that using a Bourdieusian analysis was the best way to fully understand the social practice of the STAR cohort and to wholly comprehend their lived experience.

Secondly, I was aware that this research was a unique snapshot in time of high achieving sixth form experience and applications to Oxbridge between 2020-21. Moreover, this was completely distinctive because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was also just a portrait of one sixth form college and 12 high achieving sixth form students in the North-west of England. The participants were only

interviewed once and therefore such a small sample size at such an exceptional point in time would limit some aspects of the conclusions and recommendations in their applicability to other high achieving sixth form students and educational institutions. Moreover, such a small sample size meant other factors such as subject choice (in terms of what the STAR students actually applied to study at Oxbridge) could be not be significantly analysed and this would benefit further analysis in a larger study. In addition, at the time of writing (2023), it is clear that certain aspects of the UCAS process are changing such as the new format of the personal statement and reference writing recently announced (UCAS 2023). Therefore, although some of the points made in the final conclusions and recommendations will be of use to students, educators and professional bodies, some aspects have already been superseded by changing events and strategies.

Finally, the findings and analysis, particularly when looking at certain positions with the sub-fields, are focused around the student experience and perceptions. Although this was always the intention and is what I set out to uncover, it would be interesting and would provide deeper insight to look at the social practice and decision making of other field agents such as the Oxbridge admissions tutors and academics. Such research would provide an interesting counterpoint to perspectives on field placings and understanding the prevailing doxa of certain sub-fields and is one of the recommendations for further research in the final chapter. Nevertheless, regardless of understanding other constituents that make up particular sub-fields, this research still holds true in that the findings of this research represent the lived experience of the high achieving STAR students regardless of how other agents such as Oxbridge admissions tutors intended such sub-fields to be experienced.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations

This thesis has sought to seek new knowledge in the under-theorised area of the lived experience of high achieving sixth form students and in particular in terms of their experience of applying to Oxbridge universities. It has given an overview of other research in these areas and has provided a methodological and theoretical justification for the research. In particular this thesis set out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the students' lived experiences of being identified as a high achieving Sixth Form Student?
- What is the lived experience of high achieving students in preparing and going through the Oxbridge application process?
- How are their decisions informed in applying to Oxbridge?

Utilising ethnographic techniques and theorising using Bourdieusian analysis, the research intended to shine a light on the social practice of high achieving sixth form students. In particular, the research uncovered a lived experience that was characterised by a sustained emphasis on high grades and achievement in the three key sub-fields of the sixth form college, home and online. Their experience was consistent with other research (Cross et al 2014) in that it was typified by being different, but the college and the support programme was partly responsible for this difference (Reay 1998). In a significantly original finding, the research demonstrated the struggle for high achieving students to adapt to online learning during the pandemic and how this had negatively affected them. The lived experience of the Oxbridge Application system for these high achieving sixth form students was revealed to be challenging with the process being difficult, problematic and rooted in myths. Each stage of the process was an obscuration - lacking clear success criteria (for both the students and teachers supporting the process), resulting in a lack of confidence in themselves and the process, but one in which they (misguidedly) felt ultimately responsible. This was exacerbated with the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the transition to more activities online (such as WP programmes or interviews) which only increased the rift between their own identity and considering themselves as 'Oxbridge material'.

For these high achieving students their perception of successfully applying to Oxbridge was based on a gamble of being 'lucky' rather than effectively meeting a clear threshold of entry. The research has consistently made the case that these actions in Bourdieusian terms could constitute symbolic violence and could be considered socially unjust.

In wanting to research this object of study, I intended to make an original contribution and extend the knowledge base on high achieving students in England, particularly in the under researched area of Sixth Form, and to also document from a student experience what the Oxbridge application process was like. In addition, I also gained a unique insight into the transition to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I therefore put forward the following recommendations in a bid to try and engage with students, educators and the Oxbridge admissions staff and improve high achieving student's experience of education and in particular of the Oxbridge application process.

Recommendations for practice

In terms of high achieving student experience within the Sixth form college, home and online, it is clear that certain actions can be put forward that need to be in place to improve their experience. In particular:

- Greater awareness and articulation of high achieving support programme (STAR) including justification for entry criteria and why the programme exists. This is both for the students that are part of the programme and for the wider college community to understand why the programme exists
- Giving students more choices regarding the high achieving support programme (STAR). Students should have the option to 'opt in' during enrolment not just automatic.
- More time and money spent on teacher training in understanding the Oxbridge Application process, particularly on Continuing Professional Development in aspects such as Oxbridge exam preparation
- More engagement with parents in how to support high achieving students at home
- More interventions on skills in dealing with lost learning during the pandemic and the switch to online for high achieving students

- More time and resources spent working with high achieving students on the impact of the pandemic on mental health and motivation

In terms of the Oxbridge Application process, it was evident that at each stage, the high achieving students felt disadvantaged and out of their depth. Primarily this was because they were unsure what they were doing and had key success criteria obscured or withheld from them. Some key actions that would make a fundamental difference would be:

- Re-start and upscale more face to face outreach and widening participation events
- Assign mentors who have successfully been through the Application process to pass on their experiences and provide support
- Provide exemplar material of 'good' personal statements that Oxbridge would deem as successful (this also applies in the wake of the announcement of the changes to UCAS statements)
- Provide explicit syllabuses, schemes of work, past papers and mark schemes for every subject regarding the Oxbridge entry examinations as well as online teaching
- Give applicants the choice of online or face to face interviews
- Provide sample questions or a list of the actual questions used for interviews for every subject.
- Provide video exemplars of the interview process for every subject
- Provide transparency and an overview of the 'weighting' applied and how scoring works for each stage of the application process
- Adopt a personalised process to engaging students with regard to success or failure in their application and opportunities for students to gain more clarity
- Provide more training for UCAS and Oxbridge advisors on the admissions process
- Create an Oxbridge advisors admissions portal where training material and advice and guidance is centrally stored for every subject

Recommendations for further study

As outlined in the limitations section, this research was small scale, confined to one focus group and twelve interviews in a sixth form college in the North West of England. Throughout this research, decisions have been made that highlight particularly themes in the research and at times, certain aspects of the research revealed tantalising glimpses that would require further research. In particular:

- Comparative experience of Oxbridge application in a state school and private school
- A longitudinal study following high achieving students from sixth form college through to Oxbridge and beyond
- Deeper exploration and analysis into how class, gender and ethnicity affects high achieving students and the Oxbridge process
- An ethnographic study of the experience of the application process from an admissions perspective. i.e. a researcher being present during each stage of the process

Epilogue

As I submit this thesis in December 2023, I write this postscript in the middle of the cycle of the Oxbridge Application Process. Students have frantically written their personal statements, endured the admissions tests (in which some were more farcical than others following problems nationally with the online test provider), been through mock interviews and subsequently some students have had the email inviting them for an actual Oxbridge interview(s). Much has changed but also much has stayed the same. Certainly, my own practice has changed in how I go about my own role with the STAR cohort. The emphasis on student choice within the STAR cohort and subsequent programmes is now more paramount and I am a lot more conscious of how the institution as a whole can 'sweep' a student along without them being able to opt out. Similarly, I have begun to administer whole college CPD to my colleagues on the experiences of high achieving students and this has spawned small scale action research projects within subject areas. I was also able to hold a parents/guardians of Oxbridge applicants information evening for the first time which added a new dimension in support through the Oxbridge application process. However, 'lost learning' and mental health are still key issues in the 16-19 education sphere and the lack of funding to bridge these gaps remains a major issue.

The appetite for applying to Oxbridge is still there but the process still partly remains an obscuration and what would be considered to be very 'patchy' in its transparency. Some subjects have videos regarding the process, some do not. Some subjects provide past examination papers, some do not. Some colleges invite students in person for the interview, some are online, some give them the choice. No examples of personal statements are provided and no weighting or detailed 'success criteria' has ever been given. Students come back with anecdotes of their interviews ranging from the nice (it was just a friendly chat'), to the more severe ('the interviewer did not look at me once') and so the Oxbridge myths continue to be perpetuated and In a Bourdieusian sense the struggle over resources still continues.

I embarked on this research journey to understand the lived experience of high achieving sixth form students and I feel that this research has significantly enhanced my understanding of this and my own practice. It has given me fresh insight into the 'rules of the game' of the Oxbridge application process and I will continue researching and sharing my findings in a bid for a fairer and more equitable system that I feel high achieving sixth form students deserve.

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Appendix 1: Example profile of a STAR student

Nathaniel is a former student who left Northwest College in 2019 to study Physics at Oxford. Described by his teachers at the college as a 'once in a generation' talent, Nathaniel's aptitude for Science was evident at High School where he received numerous accolades and ultimately gained straight 9s in his GCSEs, automatically joining the STAR programme on enrolment to the college. Nathaniel was raised by his mother and was the first in his family to apply for university. Alongside his academic studies, Nathaniel had weekly tutorial sessions with fellow STAR students where he developed his Independent Learning skills. The STAR programme facilitated various opportunities to gain more experience in Physics and thus in his first year he went on a Physics trip to Cambridge University, had monthly mentoring as part of an Oxbridge widening participation scheme and had a four week research placement in the Summer holidays in a Physics department at a Russell Group University as part of charitable foundation scheme. In his second year he applied to Oxford, receiving intense support with his application, interview technique training and extra examinations support from the STAR team. Nathaniel gained a place at Oxford and with intense revision achieved four A*s in his A-Levels, taking up his place at Oxford in October 2019.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Understanding experiences of high achieving sixth-form students through the Oxbridge Application Process

Participant Information

You are invited to take part in a pilot study of student experience of being part of the STAR cohort. The purpose of the research is to investigate your feelings and reflections about being part of this group and how this affects your day-to day experience of Sixth Form College life as well as trialling different research methods. You have been approached because you are a member of the STAR cohort.

This research aims to inform the further development of sixth form identification and provision for most able students and to identify how the Sixth Form College can better provide for the STAR cohort as well as inform potential changes in policy on a local and national level.

It is up to you to decide if you want to take part, or not. A copy of the information provided here is yours to keep, along with the consent form if you do decide to take part. You can still decide to withdraw, within two weeks of the research activity outlined below, without giving a reason, or you can decide not to answer a particular question. The benefits of taking part include an opportunity to reflect on your experience of being part of STAR with others.

You will be asked to attend a one-hour focus group meeting, involving a small group of other STAR students, taking place in college and at a time that is convenient for everyone. In this meeting you will be asked to describe your experience of the STAR cohort, how this has affected your time at college, share episodes of your experience and comment on possible models of gathering data such as via social media and video diary. The focus group will be audio recorded. You may also be asked to attend a follow up session to clarify the accuracy of what was said at the focus group. This will also be audio recorded.

We will not withhold any information about the reasons we are involving you, or the purpose of the study, and you will be given an opportunity to discuss your participation. The data collected from you will be anonymised and used only to inform the research study. Any material that is produced by the study will not name you or your college without your direct written permission. The raw data will be kept securely and will be deleted upon completion of the doctorate which is expected at the end of 2023. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

The data from this pilot study will be used to help focus the final doctorate thesis. It may also be used as data in the thesis itself. The anonymised data may additionally be presented in future educational conferences and/or publications. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Researcher: Damian Windle: [email address]
Supervisor: Richard Pountney: [email address]

Supplementary Information

Since 25th May 2018 the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) replaced the Data Protection Act and governs the way that organisations use personal data. Personal data is information relating to an identifiable living individual. Transparency is a key element of the GDPR and this Privacy Notice is designed to inform you:

- how and why the University uses your personal data for research,
- what your rights are under GDPR, and,
- how to contact us if you have questions or concerns about the use of your personal data.

Legal Basis for Research Studies:

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at:

https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research

However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately, and their rights respected. This study was approved by the University Ethics Committee.

Contact Details:

Details of who to contact if you have any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study are given below:

You should contact the Data Protection Officer if:	You should contact the Head of Research Ethics if:
• you have a query about how your data is used by the University • you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately) • you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data [email address]	• you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated [email address]
Postal address: [Address of University] Telephone: [phone number]	

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: Understanding experiences of high achieving sixth-form students through the Oxbridge Application Process

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

	YES	NO
1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
2. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
4. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
5. I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
6. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for the purpose of assessment and future educational conference presentations/publications.	☐	☐

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Contact details:

_____

Researcher's Name (Printed): Damian Windle

Researcher's Signature: _____

Researcher's contact details:

Damian Windle, [Address and contact details]

Supervisors contact details:

Richard Pountney [Email address]

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: Understanding experiences of high achieving sixth-form students through the Oxbridge Application Process

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

	YES	NO
7. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
8. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
9. I understand that my son/daughter is free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
10. I agree that my son/daughter can provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
11. I wish my son/daughter to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
12. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that they cannot be identified), to be used for the purpose of assessment and future educational conference presentations/publications.	☐	☐

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____**Date:** _____

Parent/Guardian Name (Printed): _____

Son/daughter Name (Printed): _____

Contact details:

_____

Researcher's Name (Printed): Damian Windle   **Researcher's Signature:** _____

Researcher's contact details:

Damian Windle, [Address and contact details]

Supervisors contact details:

Richard Pountney [email address]

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN: UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF HIGH ACHIEVING SIXTH-FORM STUDENTS THROUGH THE OXBRIDGE APPLICATION PROCESS

What data will you collect or create?

Physical Data

Voice recordings of focus group with participants. The mp3 audio files will be recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed onto MS Word document files.

Approx. total storage required: 10gb

1. How will your data be documented and described?

The audio data will be transcribed verbatim onto MS Word files and stored alongside the audio files.

2. How will you deal with any ethical and copyright issues?

Written consent will be gained from the participants to store and use the data and it's use in any future publications/conference presentations. Any information that could be used to identify the participant, institution or anybody else mentioned during the focus group will be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms during the transcription process.

3. How will your data be structured, stored and backed up?

The audio files will be transferred to the encrypted Q drive on the secure University network and then deleted from the voice recorder file. There will be a file for the focus group with the relevant mp3 recording and MS Word transcription, with a pseudonym identifier and version number for each document, to show drafts.

4. What are your plans for the long-term preservation of data supporting your research?

The audio files and transcripts will be stored on the Q drive for the duration of the Ed.D – approximate completion date is December 2023. The audio files will then be deleted and the transcripts stored securely for 10 years.

5. What are your plans for data sharing after submission of your thesis?

The pilot study data will be used primarily to inform the thesis. However, the results may be disseminated via conferences and publications.

There are no funding body requirements.

Appendix 6: Focus group question guide

Ground Rules

- Thank you for taking part – Research as part of doctorate etc
- Please don't hold back - it's ok to criticise me, the programme etc
- Please try and speak up
- Right to withdraw
- Going to record

Research Questions

- What are the students' lived experiences of being identified as a high achieving Sixth Form Student?
- What is the lived experience of high achieving students in preparing and going through the Oxbridge application process?
- How are their decisions informed in applying to Oxbridge?

Key areas of discussion

History – what does it mean to be high achieving?

- What does it mean to be high achieving?
- When were you identified?

Day to day life of being STAR

- How do you see yourself and how do others see you?
- How did you understand being labelled as STAR? – negative/positive?
- How was day to day life? -
- What was the experience of STAR in relation to other Social factors/cultural factors e.g. class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality
- Being STAR in time of Covid?

Oxbridge

- Talk me through your initial reaction to the application process.
- What influenced your decision to apply to Oxbridge?
- How did you find the process? Talk me through each stage, deciding to apply, statement, exams, mock interviews, actual interview, offer, then getting the grades to actually going.
- What were your hopes and fears of this whole application process?

Anything else you want to say?

Thank you

Appendix 7: Interview Schedule

Ground Rules

- Thank you for taking part – Research as part of doctorate etc
- Please don't hold back - it's ok to criticise me, the programme etc
- Please try and speak up
- Right to withdraw
- Going to record

Research Questions

- What are the students' lived experiences of being identified as a high achieving Sixth Form Student?
- What is the lived experience of high achieving students in preparing and going through the Oxbridge application process?
- How are their decisions informed in applying to Oxbridge?

Introduction

For the purpose of the recording - could you just introduce yourself about who you are etc

History - Define most able - as high achieving.

- What does it mean to be high achieving?
- When were you identified?
- How does it feel?
- How aware were you of policy/strategy or anything different?

Being STAR

- What did it mean?
- What did the label do?
- Did it change anything?
- How did you see yourself and how did others see you?
- How did you understand being labelled as STAR? – negative/positive?
- How was day to day life? -
    - Lessons?
    - College?
    - Friendships?
    - Family?
    - Aspirations?
    - Anything else that affects you?
- What was the experience of STAR in relation to other Social factors/cultural factors e.g. class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality
- Was this experience fair? In relation to the rest of society?
- What do you feel in relation to academic achievement?

Oxbridge/elite

- Talk me through your initial reaction to the application process.
- What influenced your decision to apply to Oxbridge? Why apply?
- What pushed you in or pulled you away?
- How did you find the process? Talk me through each stage, deciding to apply, statement, exams, mock interviews, actual interview, offer, then getting the grades to actually going.
- Was the process fair?
- Did being STAR change anything?
- How did you find writing your personal statement?
- How did you prepare for your entrance exam? How was it?
- How were your mock interviews? How have you prepared
- What were your hopes and fears of this whole application process?

STAR in time of Covid

- Is it any different?
- How has lockdown been?
- Economic capital?
- Social capital?
- Cultural capital?
- Talk through other online activites e.g WP process, open days?
- How has the Oxbridge process been online?
- Do you have faith that the application process is fair?

Experience of Oxbridge now (if former student)

- Looking back, what are your reflections on the process?
- How does it compare to your peers?
- Was it fair?
- What could be better/improved?
- Is there equality of opportunity?
- What has been your experience of Oxford now? What has it done?
- Tell me about the difference between Oxford and home
- What would you say to your 18 year old self?
- How has it changed you?

Anything else you want to say?

Thank you

Appendix 8: Extract from research diary

2/12/20 - Vidal Oxbridge interview and ipad

Vidal came to see me today detailing that he is a 'tier 3' interview for Oxbridge. This means he must have a touchscreen and stylus to attend the interview – he doesn't have one (Is this fair?)

Vidal is worried and agitated – he has spoke to the college who have said that it is fine to use pen and paper and it shouldn't be the thing that he should be worrying about.

3/12/20

Vidal still worried about it all – he has spoken with his family who are all concerned that it is not fair and can't believe that he is expected to have an ipad. 'Everyone else will have an ipad which puts me at a disadvantage and makes me feel inferior' - Follow this up in interview.

(Consider the field placings in this situation – what are the taken for granted assumptions at play?)

(What is my role in this situation?)

Appendix 9: Examples of coding

Main Theme	Level 1 sub theme	Level 2 sub theme (number of occurrences in brackets)	Example Quote
Habitus	Being different	social class (53)	Lacey: 'Obviously, private schools had the best support. If we'd gone ahead with actual exams because you're graded on a curve that was definitely going to be unfair and... I think that's kinda why I'm glad we've gone with the optional approach to all the end of year tests nothing moderated it in that way, because otherwise the private schools, the grammar schools were going to get all the top grades and the public schools were going to get all the bottom grades.'
		gender (6)	Allana: 'So gender I've seen like…Maybe women having to work harder than men just to get the same jobs or even like with statistics, like with the recent Sarah Everard case? Or with like the gender gap paying thing. So I've got all that now. I've definitely become more aware of my surroundings and how society works in general.'
		fitting in (50)	Charlene: 'I think you associate success with... like social status you…I think it just led to even more of an impostor syndrome. I guess that like…I never felt what I looked like and I still don't…It never feels quite right and I'm I'm very aware of how I look to other people and that that's not how I feel to other people at all.
		Ethnicity (9)	Wanisha: 'I actually can't put my finger on it but Bengali

			parents really like their kids to go in to medicine. And why... I do think it's just stability. And especially cause like they've grown up seeing like a lack of doctors and in like their villages and like where they've lived and it's like if we came with our daughter who's a doctor and like all these people who are ill because like people in Bangladesh. They have like so many everybody's got diabetes like everybody. I don't what it is.But I think yeah, they just want people to like help and like it's a plus on every side. Like you get to help people, you know everything, you're smart and you get a lot of money. There's just nothing wrong with it.'
		Peer group (27)	Jack: 'I feel like as anyone going for a friend You want people that are like minded and you can have interesting conversations with and topics You both find interesting so like. If you're not in STAR and you tried to discuss STAR topics…It's a bit of a barrier.'
		Place/Field Fit (41)	Lacey: "I don't know anyone in the local area that ever went to a University that wasn't in Manchester. Not many people leave here. Most people work supermarkets for the rest of their lives or become carers. That's what this area is.'
	Being STAR/Most Able	rules of the game (51)	Aaliyah: 'if I had, I would have known like the things that they were looking for. More I guess cause I was going off okay, what about me? Would they like like to know and stuff? I was going through my personal statement that's what they were like. Okay, yeah she's a good fit but

		215	they didn't ask anything on my personal statement and I was annoyed because I had a whole thing prepared. I was so excited to talk about my EPQ and it didn't come up.'
		misrecognition (14)	Vance: 'That's interesting because I mean exam results are like cut and dry like you either have them or you haven't achieved the mark that they were looking for. So that is kind of…I think that's quite fair. Coz you have either done well or you didn't. It's kind of… black and white.'
		Conatus: Acceptance of Fate (27)	Lacey: 'At the end of the day it could simply, come down to the way your interviewers, feeling on the day of your interview. It's always a wild card.'
		Positive experience (21)	Wanisha: 'I would never change it like ever I would never - it sounds so cocky but I don't wanna be like that student that gets like grade 3s…'
		Work ethic (19)	Vance: 'I guess it meant I tried to pull my finger out a little bit more just in case it something went wrong, so I had to be ready because I was, you know you've been allocated to this group because of your past achievements in preparation for the achievements that you will then have. So you gotta try and live up to that.'
		Measuring success (42)	Wanisha: 'I feel like the worst thing would be to get an offer on the 10th of January and then it's conditional A*AA, and then you do your A levels and you get AAA. I feel like that would be horrible, not because if you get rejected during interview stage you can kind of blame the whole thing on like it was too competitive there were too many people. Like you never

		216	would have gotten in anyway, whereas if you get an offer and then you get like below the grades that you need that's like on you like completely. That's not because like it was too competitive. That's not because you didn't have a chance at all. It's literally because you didn't do well enough. That would be pretty horrible. Like I keep imagining that in my head and I just don't want it to happen. I've not even got an offer yet, but I feel like that would be horrible.'
		Compare with others/competition (42)	Helen: 'Expectations for myself and rather than competing with peers and friends, it's more like competing with myself to try and get better and better. And then from there it's like competing nationally to try and go to those top universities and be in that top percentage of people that get the good grades.'
	Emotions	confidence/self belief (15)	Charlene: I think that started to reinforce to me to work quite hard and I got put on the STAR programme as well….And then…I don't know… Maybe I just started to see a bit more in myself through that. So I started working quite hard in college, but never really considered going to Oxford either, just like I think someone would joke about it every now and again…'
		Fears | Negative self esteem (49)	Lacey: 'And like especially with everything that's gone on in the last year… Different schools have different levels of support. Even if we sit exams... the grading system has not been the best....whoever has had the best support gets the best grades.'

		Pressure (33)	Vance: 'And then you have an actual interview where they basically quiz you and say are you really good enough and then you have to wait for ages and ages and then you get your result. Which is quite daunting, I thought anyway.'
Capitals	cultural capital (52)		Wanisha: 'Everybody acts like Northwest is some scratty place... I don't know. I think other than the fact that like a lot of people from my high school just have dropped out of college. Sounds so lame...like they've gone into hair and beauty, which isn't a bad thing, but it's the people I thought would go into hair and beauty have gone into hair and beauty. I think it's…I don't know if it's this area or just…I mean it might be this area. I think people tend to follow like what their parents do and I don't think a lot of parents round here went to University. So like I know one friend, she's going into hair and beauty because her mum's a hair stylist so I think fair enough. Yeah, maybe it's got a little bit to do with it…'
	economic capital/money (8)		Charlene: 'My mum got me a tutor for biology, which I felt a bit bad about coz we didn't actually have that much money and I saw that this person is like £35.00 an hour and she comes to my house once a week. I know and we just go over biology past papers. So I think maybe it wasn't the tutor as such, but knowing how much money that costs made me actually work really hard at biology so that tutor is worth something.'
	social capital (6)		Vance: 'I think the key is kind of the connections that you make there, or I'll try and make there

			that... kind of like I said before. that Oxford carries a bit of weight, and so if there is a situation where I might be a little bit tenuous on, say, getting a job or something, Oxford might just tip it slightly in my favour.'
Fields	Lockdown	lockdown hysteresis (41)	Helen: 'Well, the cameras are off the mics are off so anything you want to say goes through the chat and to have it's quite daunting to try and you know be the only one to type questions. And when you don't understand something which is something I've been trying to work on, asking more questions in in class, it's just very daunting to be that person who is the one that's asking for everyone to see.'
		lockdown habitus (10)	Aaliyah: 'I haven't been taking as many notes. I don't really....the notes I make is usually video notes on paper, so that's why I've kind of been sticking to a bit more....So when he goes through something it's more... I need to make it to memory because I'm not used to. Just like writing up everything...you know what I mean, It's a lot different.'
		lockdown cultural capital (12)	Lacey: 'think yeah, those opportunities I wanted to take up over the summer that I didn't end up getting to take up like there was summer schools. I was wanting to go visit again. But obviously none of that was able to go ahead.'
		lockdown economic capital (7)	Aaliyah: 'Yeah, I I worked at XXXX and because obviously football games haven't been going on, I haven't had any work so I used to get quite a bit which I'd be able to spend on

			myself and now I can't. I can't obviously work. Haven't been able to get another job because obviously they're giving it to people who need it like adults who need to pay rent and stuff which I understand because obviously they've lost their jobs and things like that...'
	College/School	teachers influence/support (24)	Jo: 'Yeah, I think it was only a specific teacher or like a specific couple of teachers that really like understood that I had the potential and that was in year 10.'
		Most Able strategy (25)	Lacey: 'From year 4 my school hired a tutor to teach me because they said the teachers there couldn't teach to my level.'
	Home	family (71)	Vance: 'Well originally kind of GCSE time, was the first time I had to properly prepare myself to know everything. So I didn't know how to do that. I was waddling about making mind Maps and all kinds of rubbish and so mum sat down with me and made like a list of what this is, what we're going to do, and so at the start my self discipline was lacking slightly so she would sit me down and say, right, you're doing 3 hours of this. Go. Do it now. And so then, as that became kind of normal, so she backed off and I just continued doing that. But I would say that's probably the biggest effect it's had.'
	Oxbridge	fairness of admissions (38)	Aaliyah: 'if I had, I would have known like the things that they were looking for more...I guess coz I was going off okay, what about me? Would they like to know and stuff? I was going through my personal statement but they didn't ask anything on

			my personal statement and I was annoyed because I had a whole thing prepared. I was so excited to talk about my EPQ and it didn't come up.'
		Doxa: Myth of oxbridge (29)	Vance: 'I'd heard a lot of rumours about people who have been kind of coached for the entrance exams, which obviously I hadn't, so I thought I was going to be at quite a major disadvantage going in.'
		Oxbridge application/exam (44)	Lacey: 'It's like in the maths Exam I did every practice paper I could find for the admissions tests and then it came down to it and I barely got the first paper done in time.'
		Oxbridge interview (39)	Charlene: 'I thought like "I can't wear jeans in Oxford", but I'm gonna have to like they're gonna reject me right now coz I've got a pair of jeans on [laugh]…which is just silly, but I just had this like really distorted view of what it was.'
		Oxbridge WP (28)	Jack: You can't go on open days. You can't speak to people like in person about…Yeah, like even XXXX we just did an online.'
		Rejection (12)	Cacey: '…. shouldn't have been given to me sort of thing but like.....or they they've given it to me to fit into a... tick a criteria box of "we've got this many poor kids going." That's how it felt. I mean, obviously I didn't know if that was why I I was given it or you know or we need a few more women on the science like cohort and support. Let's give it to her you know she ticks a couple boxes of meeting these percentages. That's how it felt. I mean obviously might not… you never find out why you get given one you know they never say we really liked

		221	you because of this maybe that be nice to know as well. Maybe it would be nice to know why you were rejected too?'
Participant objectivication (5)			Darren: 'Looking at it as a whole, I guess there probably are some inherent biases within that selection process, so whether you know… even for yourself, kind of looking at applicants and saying, "I think you should apply to Oxford or Cambridge" like from a really early on stage. You know with myself….you were really supportive from, you know, week one of me getting there [sixth form college]… kinda saying "oh yeah you can go" but whether there was kind of some subconscious bias from yourself… Obviously, that's a subconscious thing and I'm not accusing you of being sexist or racist or whatever else but…'