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The definitive publisher-authenticated version is:

Watson J; Nind M; Humphris D; Borthwick A (2009) Strange new world: Applying a Bourdieuan lens to understanding early student experiences in higher education. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 30(6), 665-681.

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **Strange new world: Applying a Bourdieuan lens to understanding early student experiences in higher education.**

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*(Submitted 14th July 2008)*

*(Revisions submitted 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2009)*

Word count: 7079 including reference list.

## **Strange new world: Applying a Bourdieuan lens to understanding early student experiences in higher education.**

Occupational therapy pre-registration education stands at the intersection of the fields of health and social care and higher education. UK Government agendas in both fields have seen an increase in the number of students entering with non-traditional academic backgrounds, a group noted to experience particular challenges in negotiating the transition to, and persisting and succeeding within, higher education. Drawing on data from an ongoing longitudinal case study, a Bourdieuan lens is applied to exploring the early educational experiences of a group of these students during their first year of study and highlights a number of key issues, including the high-value status of linguistic capital and its relationship to understanding the rules governing practices within the learning environment, the processes via which students manage to adapt to or interestingly, to resist, the dominant culture of the field, and some of the barriers to finding a foothold and legitimate position within the new field.

**Keywords:** widening participation, non-traditional academic backgrounds, student experience, habitus, field, linguistic capital

*This paper discusses the data emerging from the early phases of an ongoing longitudinal study that is contributing towards a PhD for the first author.*

## **Introduction**

The pre-registration education of occupational therapists in the United Kingdom (UK) marks the intersection between the fields of higher education (HE) and clinical practice and is consequently influenced by various drivers and agendas. In the HE environment in which students study for the minimum BSc (Hons) required for professional registration, the UK Government maintains its commitment to widening participation in response to the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) which led to a succession of policies and performance indicators (Naidoo, 2000). Occupational therapy (OT) education is simultaneously strongly influenced by health and social care agendas. Initial commitments to expand the workforce as part of reforming the national health service have been tempered by recent financial constraints in the sector, but recognition continues regarding the need for a wider recruitment base across health/social care professions to reflect cultural diversity (DH, 2000).

These calls for expansion and diversification have coincided with a UK-wide decline in applications to OT programmes (Craik and Ross, 2003). Consequently, the recruitment net is cast increasingly broadly changing the profile of the OT student population in the UK, with 67% of the 2005 intake aged 21 years or older and classified as mature (COT, 2007) and increasing numbers entering with non-traditional academic backgrounds.

### ***Non-traditional academic backgrounds***

The umbrella of non-traditional academic backgrounds incorporates a range of entry qualifications (e.g. various vocational qualifications, Access Certificates, Advanced (A) levels achieved as a mature student, Foundation Degrees). The early weeks of study can prove particularly challenging for students as they settle into the new learning environment and begin to understand what is required of them (Hatt and Baxter, 2003; Yorke, 2005). Students from non-traditional academic backgrounds

may experience particular difficulties in their transition into HE because of their different skills, experiences and expectations compared to traditional school leavers holding academic qualifications (HEFCE, 2002; Walker et al., 2004).

The degree of responsibility that students are expected to take for their own learning can prove surprising and difficult to adjust to, particularly where it is contrary to previous educational experiences (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Sambell and Hubbard, 2004). There is evidence of a perceived deficiency in the key study skills considered essential for HE success in those students entering with non-traditional qualifications (Abramson and Jones, 2001; Webb and Hill, 2003). This might be equally true of some traditional, academic A level entrants, but high levels of non-completion are noted in those institutions admitting a greater proportion of non-traditional students (Liang and Robinson, 2003), many of whom will hold non-traditional entry qualifications.

### ***The culture of higher education***

In the UK move from elite to mass HE, it is mature students, those with non-traditional academic backgrounds, from working-class backgrounds and from minority ethnic groups who have come to represent the 'masses' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003), although these groupings are not mutually exclusive and may overlap considerably. While participation amongst the government's target-group of 18-30 year-olds has increased, much of the expansion has been driven by school-leavers aged 18-21 (Elliott, 2003), and by those from more affluent families (Franklin, 2006). Student demographics have changed, but participation has effectively increased to greater extent than it has widened.

Quite apart from barriers such as the need for adequate economic capital to sustain the venture (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Reay et al., 2002) and, particularly for women

and mature students, the need to juggle additional competing priorities (Quinn et al., 2005; Reay, 2003), there is evidence that the educational environment can itself present an obstacle (Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2001). In the absence of significant challenges to the dominant hegemony, HE has not changed dramatically. It is increasingly evident that many of the challenges faced by students from non-traditional backgrounds stem from its long-established culture, which generally remains oriented towards the traditional white middle-class student population (Archer, 2003a; Lynch and O'Neill, 1994) and effectively resists inclusivity (Burke, 2005).

### ***Occupational therapy education***

Expansion and diversification of the UK OT workforce necessitates moving beyond diversifying the student population to providing mechanisms that support and facilitate these students to registration. In 2005, the average attrition rate across increasingly diverse OT student cohorts was 15% (COT, 2007), a situation potentially incurring significant personal costs to those individuals, in addition to the financial cost to the tax-payer of these publicly funded student places.

Small-scale studies suggest the absence of correlation between entry qualifications and exit awards for OT students (Howard and Jerosch-Herold, 2000; Howard and Watson, 1998) and that mature OT students and those with non-traditional academic backgrounds are as successful as school-leaver entrants (Shanahan, 2004).

However, students from these groups have also been found more likely than school-leavers to consider withdrawing at some stage (Wheeler, 2001), to perceive that their courses are geared towards school-leavers, failing to provide them with adequate systems of support (Graham and Babola, 1998) and at times that they have succeeded in spite of, rather than with, the support of their programme of study (Ryan, 2001).

Discussing the data emerging from an ongoing longitudinal study, this paper draws on the work of Bourdieu to provide a framework for analysis and focuses on the educational experiences of a group of OT students with non-traditional academic backgrounds as they negotiate their first year of study within the English HE environment.

### **Methods and data sources**

Learning and teaching are inextricably linked and embedded within and influenced by the nature and nuances of the context in which they occur (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Therefore, a case study methodology which actively seeks to capture complexity and to understand issues within their natural context (Yin, 2003) was adopted. In an instrumental single-case design (Stake, 1995), a neither unique nor extreme undergraduate OT programme became a vehicle for exploring the educational experiences of students with non-traditional academic backgrounds.

Thirteen volunteer participants, whose characteristics are summarised in Table 1, were drawn from a single cohort. Reflecting the typical gender imbalance and limited ethnic diversity in OT education (COT, 2007), all of the participants are women from white British backgrounds. However, illustrating that 'non-traditional academic backgrounds' potentially encompass the entire adult life-span, participants ranged in age from 18 to 51 (average: 36) at entry, and experienced a study gap of up to 31 years (average: 15) prior to commencing their pre-entry educational qualifications. Demonstrating that holding non-traditional academic qualifications also transcends social background, participants represent virtually the full spectrum of socioeconomic classifications and only a minority have absolutely no vicarious exposure to HE.

TABLE 1 LOCATED APPROXIMATELY HERE

Amongst wider phases and components, this paper draws specifically on:

- a. data emerging from focus groups conducted prior to and in the first days of participants' first semester, exploring their pre-entry educational experiences and motivations for, expectations of and perceived preparedness for studying in HE,
- b. the content of participants' reflective diaries from that year recording any educational experiences that they felt were particularly significant or meaningful to them, and
- c. one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted towards the end of their first year, informed by individual reflective diaries and focusing on participants' initial experience of learning in HE and factors influencing those experiences.

### **Students' experiences of the transition into HE**

A period of sustained engagement with and immersion in the corpus of data utilising theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) underpinned by Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus, field and capital produced codes that subsequently converged to represent themes suggesting clusters of shared experience amongst some of the participants. Examination of each data set enabled exploration of how each participant was positioned in relation to the new field of HE they had entered. Bourdieu (1992) describes fields as bounded social spaces - spheres or arenas of life which form distinct social worlds that are positioned alongside and in relation to each other. Fields encompass the 'rules of the game' and taken-for-granted practices that are imposed (without necessarily being explicitly stated) on those who seek to enter or remain within them and therefore structure practice by defining the range of possible and acceptable actions and behaviours available to those operating within that field (Grenfell, 2004).

Some participants felt much more comfortable within the field they entered than others. Bourdieu's theories suggest that juxtaposing the nature and expectations of

the new field in relation to those previously occupied by individual participants and the established habitus that each brings with them can shed light on this situation. 'Habitus' describe the system of durable and transposable dispositions through which individuals perceive, judge and behave within, and think about the world (Bourdieu, 1990). It represents the unconscious patterns of being and perceiving that are acquired during lengthy periods of exposure to particular social conditions (shared by individuals sharing similar circumstances) which become a filter through which the world is experienced, with past experiences and patterns of being and viewing the world influencing how individuals perceive and respond to present circumstances. Habitus is therefore structured by the social forces and conditions of the field that produce it while simultaneously structuring individuals' behaviours, perceptions and expectations (Wacquant, 1998). Habitus and field might usefully be thought of as two sides of the same coin and it is congruence between them that influences individual experiences when they enter a new field: '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 for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

Based on an overview of each data set, the horizontal axis of Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic representation of the 'degree of fit', or congruence, between the established habitus of individual participants and the practices and expectations of the new field of HE they have entered. The vertical axis represents participants' experiences, highlighting variations that cannot be linked to similarities in pre-entry qualifications alone. Individual positions have been overlaid with an indication of the experience clusters that were identified during data analysis, with the overlap between three of the clusters reflecting the complex reality of student experiences.

FIGURE 1 LOCATED APPROXIMATELY HERE



The characteristic of each cluster will be considered in turn, with key elements and features illustrated by highlighting the experiences and data of one participant as an exemplar of each cluster. All quotes are drawn from interviews at the end of participants' first year of study.

### **Fitting in with the new field**

Participants whose data indicated a degree of congruence with the new field describe an element of 'coming home'. This cluster is positioned towards the 'natural fit' end of the horizontal spectrum of Figure 1, although they come from various socioeconomic backgrounds and hold various pre-entry qualifications. They feel comfortable in the HE learning environment and, based on their descriptions of their experiences, there is apparently little adjustment necessary for their established habitus to meet the requirements of the new field.

These participants are being intellectually challenged by HE, but there is no sense of undue struggle. They are able to recognise and interpret the 'rules' and expectations of the field (e.g. how to behave, manage their learning, access support, present submitted work, reference). They have some existing stocks of what Bourdieu terms 'capital' that are relevant to the new field.

Capital refers to any resource that holds symbolic value within a field and therefore acts as a currency of that field. Capital can be *economic*, referring to material and financial assets, *cultural*, incorporating scarce symbolic goods, skills and titles, and embodied dispositions such as accent, clothing and behaviour, or *social*, reflecting resources accrued through membership of social groups and networks. Individuals hold unequal positions and experience unequal trajectories within a field based upon volume and composition of their portfolio of capital (Wacquant, 1998).

The capital valued in and by students might reasonably be anticipated to differ from that valued in and by academics in the field, although they potentially represent different positions on single spectrum. Students are not vying for power and high status within the field in the way that academics might, but they are, at least initially, seeking to secure a legitimate position or acceptance within it. Participants within the 'fitting in' cluster are evidently endowed with capital relevant to the HE field as a result the habitus developed prior to entry conferring an advantage over others whose habitus is less congruent with the new field (Grenfell and James, 1998). Highlighting that capital begets capital, data for these participants illustrates that they draw upon existing stocks to help gather relevant additional capital as they progress. For example, social capital is frequently highlighted in their accounts and it is often deployed in the guise of collaborative study groups to facilitate learning and therefore the gathering of further relevant capital in the form of academic skills and attainments. Adequate stocks of economic capital afford greater opportunity to, for example, secure childcare, purchase learning materials making them readily accessible, and travel freely between home and university.

***George: A fish in water***

George moved from the mainland to a UK island when she married, and prior to starting a family worked in human resources in the hospitality industry. Accepting that she had chosen the wrong career, it took time to identify that that what she really wanted to do was OT, which demanded an honours degree qualification. In the interim, George started a family and left full-time employment to work in various jobs which she describes as '...just crap really'. With educational opportunities on the island limited, the family relocated to the mainland. Closer to her family and friends, she now finds herself on more familiar ground, surrounded largely by like-minded people. Fitting in with the field of HE is a strong theme for George. Unlike some other participants, she has moved to a position of greater congruence between her

established habitus and the pervading field than was previously the case. Describing the development of relationships with her peers in HE, George says:

For me it was brilliant because I'd been bringing up kids and working part-time for ... three years, so my friends [on the island] were very much housewives with kids. All they used to talk about was shopping and housework and my brain just felt like it was seeping out of my ears! So to finally come and be around people who had a bit more to say for themselves...[laughing]...other than that sort of thing, was brilliant. It's like meeting a load of like-minded people.

Re-establishing this congruence has been satisfying for George and she has used and developed her social and cultural capital to gather academic capital and succeed educationally. Illustrating an experience common to others who are 'fitting in', George highlights the congruence between her habitus and the HE field and just how clear the 'rules of the game' are to her when discussing the requirements of assessments she has encountered:

...these people who say it wasn't laid out correctly for them, and people who failed saying, oh, we weren't told what to do...and I'm going, well, we were. It's *right there*, you know!

Life is not completely straight forward for George. Her husband takes on additional work in the evenings to compensate for the limited economic capital available to the family and she has to work extremely hard to juggle the demands of her home life and those of studying. Unlike some other participants there is no sense that these aspects of her life are incompatible or that the habitus required to flourish in each is divergent. Despite leaving school with few qualifications and a break of 11 years prior to studying the A level that gained her entry to this field, George is very much a fish in water.

## **Adapting to the new field**

The cluster adapting to the new field is the largest and while their experiences are varied, broadly speaking, there is a greater emphasis on incongruence between existing habitus and the expectations of the field related to ways of thinking, modes of expression and interpretation of meaning. An important feature of habitus is that it is not fixed and inert, but dynamic, malleable and changeable to a degree, reflecting the influence of the social milieu in which an individual is immersed (Grenfell, 2004), and the data for this cluster indicate early shifts in habitus to correlate more closely with the demands of the field.

Changes to habitus are not always readily achieved, as for this cluster, the conventions and expectations of the field are obscured, making them difficult to identify and conform to. The natural understanding of the 'fitting in' cluster is absent. This means an element of academic struggle, although there is a strong sense of 'getting on with it' and ultimately the 'adapters' are successfully meeting the minimum requirements of the field. Interestingly, as illustrated by Figure 1, it is not only those with the greatest degree of incongruence with the field who experience these challenges.

James (1995: 461) describes language as one of the most robust indices of cultural capital, and language emerged as a particular issue for the 'adapters'. While those 'fitting in' did not mention language as relevant forms are naturally evident within their existing habitus, low stocks of linguistic capital held by the 'adapters' are associated with some of the difficulties in understanding the 'rules of the game', clearly evident in participants' struggles to decipher learning outcomes, assessment guidelines and marking criteria, as also identified by James (1995). The potency of linguistic capital is also more broadly evident in terms of that deployed by more powerful players in the field, particularly by staff during key learning and teaching interactions, in terms of

the need to adapt to and utilise discipline specific language, and importantly, as Burke (2005) suggests, in participants' capacity to present their knowledge and understanding in a form legitimated by the field.

Despite the challenges encountered, the data suggests that participants within this cluster are gathering capital, and, to varying extents and at variable rates, there is evidence of their habitus evolving. Interestingly, the data is strongly suggestive of efforts to simultaneously sustain existing habitus relevant to fields outside HE while seeking to adapt to the new field, and there are marked issues around the tension this generates.

***Betty: Growing, not changing***

Betty is located towards the 'incongruent habitus' end of the horizontal spectrum in Figure 1, but is nonetheless performing reasonably well in her studies. She self-identifies as 'very working class', conflicting with the data she provided at entry which put her in SEC 2 (see Table 1), and highlighted that university was never mentioned by her parents when she was growing up. She describes living as the single parent of her now teenage daughter on a council estate for a number of years before marrying her self-employed mechanic husband as she began university. While he is very supportive of her studies, juggling the competing priorities of home and study is challenging.

Illustrating the dynamic interrelationship between field and habitus, the dominance of the middle classes in HE reinforces middle class habitus as the legitimate form of that field. It is therefore interesting to note that elements of Betty's established dispositions, and therefore habitus, which are borne out of a working class social field and her sometimes difficult prior experiences and circumstances, are, to a degree, useful to her within the new field (e.g. self-reliance, drive, determination). Betty

clearly values her identity and her existing habitus, but reveals a degree of insecurity in her position within the field in her response to an academic highlighting the dominance of the middle classes in HE:

Extremely working class...Yeah. I think, possibly, I thought to myself: Maybe that was my own insecurities. It made me feel a little bit: Well, does she think that people like me shouldn't be here?

... I don't think it made *me* think that I shouldn't be here...But I know how hard I've worked to get here...And it probably made me a little bit more determined, actually.

Betty provides very clear illustrations of the role and value of linguistic capital in the field, and of the impact of having limited stocks of the particular *form* of language that is valued. Reflecting the findings of Archer (2003b: 133) and speaking about her early experiences in the field she says:

I remember a lot of note-taking. I remember a lot of...the thing that sticks in my mind is this, writing down words. I didn't have a clue what they were, I just wrote them down...[laughing]...Not just medical words...just normal...language. Sometimes some of the words that we used, I was thinking, I don't know. I haven't got a clue what that means, so I'll write that down and I'll look it up when I get home...

Despite these conscious efforts, Betty was quick to emphasise that her aim in coming to university wasn't to *change*, but to grow, and that her experiences reflect this ambition:

... I'm not going to become somebody that I'm not. You know, I'm very...I want to remain quite grounded and I don't want to lose myself along the way. This is going to help me grow.

...I don't feel that I'm changing. I feel like I'm growing.

Initially, these comments seemed to suggest resistance to the often unspoken demands that her habitus change to align more harmoniously with the expectations of the field to, as Burke (2005) suggests, become more middle class. However, Betty volunteers that she has 'adapted to what's expected of [her]', and there is evidence of her gathering capital relevant to the field. She attributes the 'maturing' of her writing skills to efforts to do a lot of academic reading and is pleased to be earning higher marks, which suggests that her outputs are starting to conform more closely with the dominant practices of the field (see, for example, Lillis, 2001). Moreover, she highlights that her use of language has changed:

I think you grow because you want to adapt to the society that you're in as well. Because I want to do well in this. I don't want to just pass my degree or pass my exams, I want to do *well* in them. So...I've had to sort of change my language, change my terminology and just fit in here at university.

I'm still looking up words...[laughs]...but not as many and I find, it's quite funny actually, because my husband looks at me sometimes and says: What was that you just said? I haven't a clue what you're on about there!...[laughs]...And I'll come out with a word and [my daughter] will just look at me and then just walk off...[laughs]...So, it's quite funny that my language and my way of explaining things is a little bit different, and my way of talking.

This last quote also illustrates the tension and potential incompatibility that seems to exist between the established habitus that fits comfortably with her usual field of practice and the habitus demanded by the new field. The language that Betty has begun to adopt to fit into the HE field is met with scepticism and incomprehension by players in her usual field in an apparent reversal of Betty's own initial experiences. Betty's talk and experiences of 'growing, not changing' suggest that she is willing to adapt, but not willing to let go of what and who she already is, an ambition that Lynch and O'Neill (1994) suggest will be difficult to achieve.

### **Resisting the demands of the new field**

A third distinct cluster of participants appear to be resisting the demands and rules that are imposed on them by the field. Although they hold varying portfolios of relevant capital, dissonance with the educational practices that dominate the field is very evident and the rules of the game are again obscured and difficult to decipher for the 'resisters'. Unlike 'adapters', however, there is a lack of prominence given to changing to meet the demands of the field. That sense of 'getting on with it' is much less evident, although all still meet the minimum academic requirements. The emphasis in this cluster rests instead on questioning or challenging the demands of the field, and on their willingness to submit to the practices legitimated by it.

Bourdieu's concept of pedagogic action describes the process by which one arbitrary form of knowledge or way of doing things is imposed by those who dominate a field. Such action serves to benefit those whose habitus reflects the dominant culture and is 'misrecognised' and therefore accepted as natural and legitimate, even by those imposed upon (Grenfell and James, 1998). The 'resisters' question why the prescribed way is the only way, suggesting perhaps that the process of misrecognition has been disrupted, and reflecting Bourdieu's central concept of struggle within the field. The 'resisters' are disposed to challenge the accepted practices of the field in an effort to advance or secure their own position within it. However, with insufficient power and capital to mount a meaningful challenge, and perhaps signalling acknowledgement that the dominant authority of the field determines definitions of success and achievement, there is evidence amongst the 'resisters' of some strategising aimed at securing the cultural capital they seek (in the form of the academic and professional qualification) without requiring themselves to become fully immersed within the field.



***Sarah: questioning and resisting***

Sarah's parents left school at the minimum age, as did two of her three siblings; she is the first in her family to attend university. Following a gap year in a kibbutz after her A-levels, her initial attempt at university aged 18 lasted only six months because her 'heart wasn't in it to start with'. Having identified 'something that [she] would really *like* to do' Sarah secured an Access qualification and returned to university as a 43-year-old mother of four once her youngest had started school. Her oldest child commenced university in the same year, while the others continue with their schooling. Her husband works long hours.

Although Sarah reports enjoying being a student and is committed to the programme, she isn't hesitant in declaring her dissatisfaction with various aspects. She was anticipating a much less academic encounter; more of an apprenticeship model without the dominance of theoretical underpinnings. While her academic record clearly demonstrates that she is capable of succeeding in the legitimated form, Sarah frequently questions the established practices of the field, particularly whether the very academic approach is really necessary:

I mean I understand the theory; you need to underpin everything with theory. You need to know why...I'm doing that. Oh, that's *why* I'm doing it. But, I think there's been a *lot* of theory... particularly in the first semester there was an awful lot of theory and not a great deal of doing...

I think for a job that is so practical, and it is so problem-solving, thinking on your feet, it does just seem quite of a mismatch, really.

Sarah has established a strong identity. She does not question herself or how she fits with the new field; she questions the validity and value of some of the expectations of the field and the habitus that it demands to be deemed successful. Sarah was drawn to OT by professionals' use of creative problem-solving to allow different individuals

to achieve similar end-goals via different approaches. She recognises and challenges the discrepancy between the underpinning philosophy of the profession and requirements of the educational route that she is taking to gain entry to it.

Sarah's engagement with the field is the most overtly strategic of all the participants. Typically, her basic ambition is to secure the cultural capital required to pursue her chosen career, but, along with others in the 'resisting' cluster, she doesn't necessarily value the HE field itself or want to fully immerse herself within it. She has some awareness of the value of different forms of capital (e.g. that accrued from studying at college and university, valuing the latter more highly), but Sarah shows few signs of actively seeking to amass capital relevant to the new field. She pays little attention, for example, to assessment results as a form of academic capital:

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about your academic performance now that you have got that first set of results?

SARAH: Umm...I haven't really thought about it like that...which is a bit bizarre, I know. But I tend to think, OK I've got those. Go to the next lot.

Similarly, gathering social capital within the new field is not a priority as Sarah tends to rely on that accrued previously. She recognises its value and demonstrates awareness of the need to nurture and sustain it, but does not apparently perceive a need to invest her time in doing so within the new field.

Mirroring the experiences of many mature students in HE, Sarah juggles a number of roles alongside that of 'student'. Perhaps reflecting normative gender expectations, she prioritises her home life over her student role and makes it clear that these aspects of her life do not intersect. She emphasises that as it was her choice to enter the new field, she alone should deal with any challenges it introduces; they should not impact on her family. She says:

...you just have to, sort of, be a split person and just think...well, I'll do this then, and then I'll do that, and then I'll go back and do that...And it's quite, it's quite a juggle...really. And it is like, well, it is like a split personality because you can't be both of them at the same time.

Sarah does not compromise her existing habitus to meet the needs of the new field any more than she has to, and therefore does not experience the tension between the demands of the new and existing fields in the manner experienced by the 'adapters'. She remains committed regardless of the frustration she sometimes feels; for her this venture is a means to an end. Despite not always agreeing with them, Sarah has confidence in her ability to meet course demands and is prepared to acquiesce as far as she must, but she is not tempted to fully immerse herself within the new field.

#### **Excluded by the field: Tracey**

The final 'cluster' is a cluster of one at this stage. Tracey was very much a 'fish out of water' from the outset and the overwhelming themes emerging from her data are of struggle and incongruent habitus on many levels. While Tracey's experience was of exclusion *by* the field there is also the potential that individuals might self-exclude in what could be described as subjective expectations of the objective probability of using and succeeding within education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 156).

Examples might, at times, include failure to apply for university, or voluntarily withdrawing ahead of anticipated failure in assessments.

Tracey is a single parent to two 'quite needy' sons who remained living in her small home town, several hours travel away, while she was at university. She has a tumultuous relationship with her ex-partner, but is often forced to rely on him for

financial support. Tracey was 'very embarrass[ed]' when she tried to explain her complex circumstances to her personal tutor because:

'It's just that here [university], I don't think many people have that problem, so I felt a bit of an outsider...'

Tracey's habitus was amongst those least congruent with the demands and expectations of the field as illustrated in Figure 1. In her own words:

'If I go back [home], there is no university there...you don't normally speak to anyone like that. You're a chamber maid or a shop assistant and there's a lot of, well, why? Why would you wanna go to uni?'

Tracey's data reveal a lack of harmony between her perspectives and disposition and those of other student players, which contributed to social exclusion and at times to what she described as 'bullying'. While Tracey did eventually make some friends, it was with students who were themselves marginalised by the broader cohort.

Tracey says that she 'thinks differently from other people' and has always liked studying, treating it 'as a hobby', but describes being uncharacteristically nervous about entering the new field. She has limited stocks of economic, social and cultural capital relevant to the field, a situation she seemed unable to remedy. She worked hard to try to identify and fulfil what was required of her, but lacking relevant linguistic and academic capital she consistently struggled; the rules of the game were very much obscured and remained so. Asked how, apart from assessment results, she could tell if she was on the right track, Tracey replied '...Do you know what, I don't know.' Speaking about her efforts to work at the level required she says:

...I'm still trying to work out what it is I think to be perfectly honest. I mean, I don't feel it's beyond me comprehension-wise. I understand it all. I really *like* it. ...I'm not quite sure what they want. You know, what I *think* they want isn't what they want.

Dyslexia complicated Tracey's experience. She was accepted into the field having openly declared this specific learning difference, but dyslexia was a source of marked 'otherness' for her and it was not successfully accommodated by the field. Tracey perceived that it had not represented a barrier on her Access course, so it was unlikely to be the only issue influencing her ability to meet the expectations of the new field. She recognised a difference in the 'rules of the game' in these two settings:

I did Psychology and I got a good mark for it so I'm just wondering *why* is it not working now? That's what I don't really know. It must be really different...

Although Tracey wasn't thriving academically and lacked confidence in this regard, her personal confidence was, after a time, soaring. She relished the fact that she was a student and *felt* as though she was gathering capital, becoming established in the new field with opportunities for her and her children to change their positions in the broader social field:

Everything that I wanted [coming to university] to achieve, it has achieved. The type of people, the type of friends, the conversations I'm having now, do you know what I mean? I'm absolutely loving it! It's what was missing in my life before...I'm *not* giving it up!

However, unlike others positioned towards the incongruent end of the spectrum in Figure 1, and despite her great optimism and commitment, Tracey was unable to find any degree of fit or any form of leverage to secure a legitimate place within the field.

There is little evidence of her gathering capital relevant to the field despite her ambition to do so. With inadequate economic capital to sustain her and re-sits yet to be successfully negotiated, the University refused Tracey re-registration for second year studies due to outstanding debts and formalised her exclusion from the field.

## **Conclusion**

While students with non-traditional academic backgrounds have potentially been exposed to learning cultures quite divergent from those encountered in HE, this in itself is insufficient to explain individual ability and/or willingness to adapt to the demands of the new learning environment. Superimposing entry qualifications over individual positions in Figure 1 supports this argument. Employing Bourdieu's conceptual tools in analysis of the data adds a new dimension to understanding individual experiences. Language represents a high-value form of cultural capital in the HE field which has a bearing on understanding the 'rules of the game', maximising the potential of learning opportunities and the ability to demonstrate 'legitimate' forms of knowledge and understanding. Gathering and deploying capital relevant to the field is important in establishing a position within it, and reiterating Bourdieu's own observation, is the evidence that capital begets capital. Until this point in the study the programme emphasis is very much on academic experiences and academic capital. Reflecting the vocational nature of the programme, the learning context in subsequent levels broadens to include clinical environments which may provide the opportunity for participants to gather different forms of equally relevant capital, which may, in turn, influence their position and success within the field. Although habitus may be required to change, it is not solely an issue of individual capacity, but also of willingness.

Exploring congruence between habitus and the dominant culture of the new field they have entered has illuminated student experiences in a powerful way. It highlights

that failure to acknowledge the pervading culture inherent within individual HE institutions and to recognise the often unspoken demands that define legitimate presentation of knowledge and understanding, that hidden curriculum, is likely to impede efforts to diversify the graduating student body and the OT workforce.

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### **Acknowledgements**

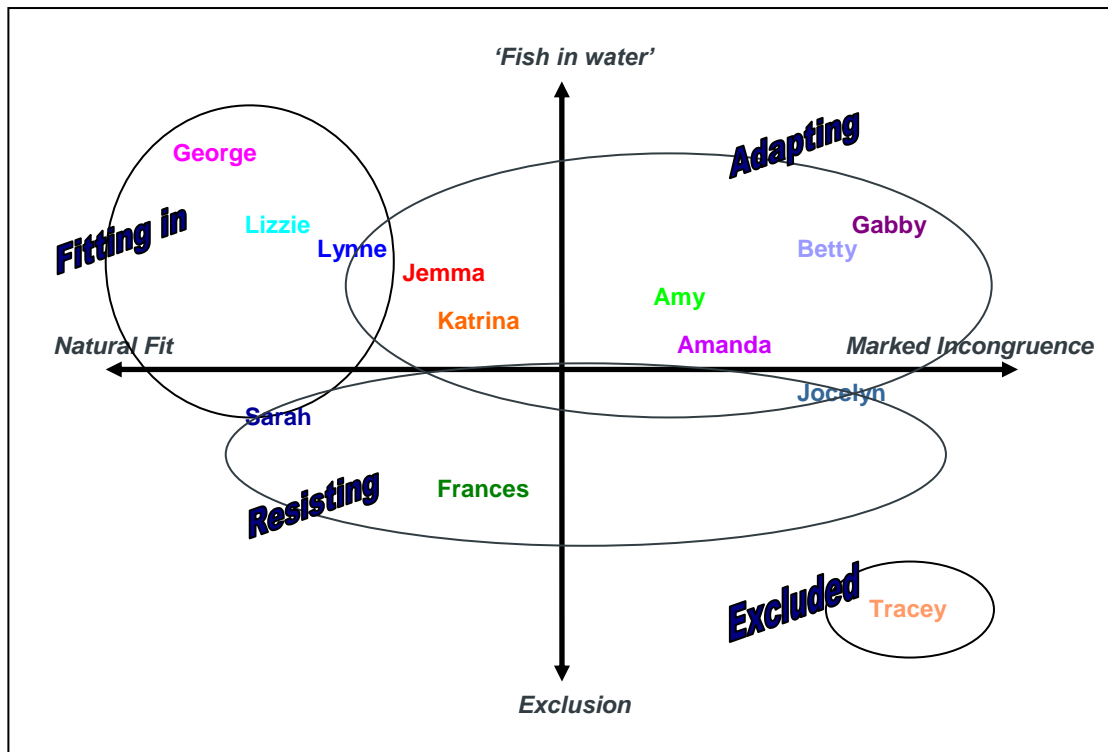
We thank the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and the participants who continue to generously give up their time to participate in the ongoing study.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at Entry	Pre-entry employment/roles	Pre-entry Education	Study Gap (Years)	SEC* given at entry	Parents' or partners' occupations	Closest HE exposure
Amanda	F	30	hairdresser	Access	8	7	Mum: hairdresser Dad: not discussed	Only sibling holds Masters degree
Amy	F	39	clerk	Access	22	X	Husband: self-employed carpenter	Sister-in-law holds degree
Betty	F	34	beauty therapist, then call centre manager	Access	9	2	Husband: self-employed mechanic	None
Frances	F	41	underwriter	Access + Yr1FdSc	15	3	Husband: fire fighter	Brother-in-law holds degree
Gabby	F	51	courier, then OT assistant	Access	31	6	Partner: mechanic	Only sibling holds degree as mature student
George	F	33	human resources officer, then various un/semi-skilled jobs	Human Biology A level	11	5	Husband: computer technician	Only sibling holds degree
Jemma	F	25	accounts analyst	Biology A level	0	3	Mum: classroom assistant Dad: government & inland revenue roles	Mum and friends hold Bachelors degrees
Jocelyn	F	38	office administrator	Psychology A level	21	X	Mum: various un/semi-skilled jobs Dad: self-employed painter and decorator	Small number of friends hold degrees
Katrina	F	18	college student	AVCE Health & Social Care	0	1	Mum: nurse Dad: naval architect	Small number of friends currently in HE
Lizzie	F	46	school cook	Access	26	6	Husband: builder	1 of 2 siblings and own children hold/studying for degrees
Lynne	F	21	call centre work	NVCE	1	2	Dad: naval engineer	Mum holds Diploma. Friends hold degrees or currently in HE
Sarah	F	43	banking IT, then home-maker & Citizens' Advice volunteer	Access	25	X	Husband: ex-RAF, now in information technology	Acquaintance holds degree as mature student
Tracey	F	44	veterinary assistant, then beauty therapist	Access	26	X	Mum: home-maker Dad: lorry driver	1 of 5 siblings holds degree, as does close friend

**Table 1. Participant characteristics.**

Note: \*Socioeconomic Classifications - 1: Higher managerial and professional occupations; 2: Lower managerial and professional occupations; 3: Intermediated occupations; 4: Small employers and own accounts workers; 5: Lower supervisory and technical occupations; 6: Semi-routine occupations; 7: Routine occupations; X: data not provided at registration and therefore not available.

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**Figure 1. Experiencing the transition**

Note: The horizontal axis represents congruence between existing habitus and requirements of the new field. The vertical axis represents participants' experiences of their position in the new field.