



# 6

## Performing the Entrepreneurial Self

Marginson (2016, p. 420) describes how higher education ‘offers students prospects of self-formation ... and self-actualisation’; however, many students from working-class backgrounds struggle with the identity demands of the higher education context (Archer et al., 2007; Reay et al., 2005). Directly related to notions of selfhood, studenthood and how students come to craft their identities, the space of higher education is increasingly about ‘creating professional projections of an ideal self, which constitute a technology of career progression for the individual and are associated with some form of exchange’ (Shuker, 2014, p. 228). In considering self-crafting, it is important to keep in mind that our current generation of young people arguably are forming their lives in an era of heightened neoliberalism, ‘crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives’ (Keddie et al., 2020, p. 99; see also Bessant et al., 2017).

Research indicates that working-class men grapple with the complexities of performing what Du Gay (1996) refers to as the ‘entrepreneur of the self’, which contrasts greatly with traditional working-class values (Reay, 2002; Phoenix, 2004; Stahl, 2015). However, arguably, working-class boys, according to Whitehead (2003), have begun to ‘move towards a more middle-class notion of masculinity centred on competitive achievement’ (p. 290). This highlights that the production of the

‘educated person’ is always subject to negotiation, though heavily informed by dominant institutions (Levinson & Holland, 1996) as well as social change. As young men transition to higher education they both invest in new forms of selfhood, adopting new selves, while simultaneously renegotiating aspects of their identity tied closely to their working-class families and peer groups (Stahl & Zhao, 2021). This chapter focuses on how performing middle-class selfhood *comes to be* and where there is engagement and resistance. While urging sociologists to be critical of treating the middle class as an undifferentiated mass, Power and Whitty (2006) point out that ‘the middle class is seen to be strategic and calculating’ (p. 451). As the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* encountered new forms of identity and new institutional cultures, they entered into a process of calibrating and regulating their identities.

In their research on masculinities in higher education, Archer and Yamashita (2003) found that the young men they interviewed ‘did not construct “fixed” or consistent masculinities; they shifted between alternative identity positions’ and they spoke ‘about trying to “leave” some identities’ (p. 127). We must understand the self as not a ‘coherent and fixed personality’, but rather *positioned by* and *produced through* powerful gender, classed and ethnic discourses (Francis, 2000, p. 19). In short, identities and gender subjectivities are discursively produced. We come to understand the self by looking at how a sense of belonging is experienced (Hall, 1996) and—with this in mind—the tensions between ‘leaving’ and ‘holding on’ has been recognized in many studies of the working class in education (Skeggs, 2002; Reay et al., 2005).

The ‘entrepreneurial self’ refers to how neoliberal subjectivities are produced, where the self—in order to be respected and validated—must commit to an existence focused on capitalization through calculated acts and investments. First-in-family males who are more adaptable to the demands of higher education often will, as we will see, invest in forms of selfhood aligned with neoliberal prerogatives. In his study of African-American men in predominantly white higher education institutions, Harper (2004) documents a diversity of identity practices and different modes of masculinity but a consistent respect and admiration for the high-achieving males who were focused on ‘taking care of business’ (p. 98). Therefore, while there are different masculine subjectivities at

play, what the institution itself holds in esteem becomes important social currency. Those who are not able to access whatever the currency is are placed in a marginalized position. Echoing work on class disadvantage in higher education (Jack, 2014; Sellar & Gale, 2011), many of the participants in this study spoke about their isolation at university and the tenuous associations formed rather than authentic friendships:

And I feel like there's no close groups ... so while I, in high school ... I came from a different school, so everyone already had their friendships groups and you had to try and find some. Yeah. it's just different. (Adam)

generally speaking, you're going to be [on your] own anyway because you don't have past [secondary school] classmates that you come up with so you can be quite lonely at times. (Avery)

Adam and Avery here highlighted that the university space is dominated by middle-class and elite students, many of whom are funnelled through independent schools into higher education. As one of the select few to attend university from their secondary school, they were at an extreme social disadvantage from the outset. In surveying the data, I noticed that the mention of loneliness was generally coupled with a strong attempt to make new friends at university:

It can be lonely, if you make it, if you make it lonely. In my first week I was ... lonely walking around by myself. I was too shy to ask the people around me where my classes were. So I had to go to security and ask them, which was a bit awkward but, but making, just making new friends and getting used to the environment, I guess, it just makes the whole process easier. (Osman)

a lot of people I know sit, I see just sit in there by themselves all the time doing nothing or sitting in there in the lectures by themselves. It's a bit hard but at least, at least I try to find some friends or not, they might not be your best mates but at least you know them and it's good for you mentally, thinking, oh I don't want to go today there's no one there, don't have any friends there. Or at least just go sit next to someone and then get to know them a bit and make you feel a bit better I suppose. (Isaac)

Furthermore, and related to my aim of understanding how they come to perform new forms of selfhood, the associations formed with others at university served as another entry point to understanding the expectations of higher education which, according to the participants, contrasted greatly with the culture of their secondary schools. When discussing his perception of what it takes to be successful at university, Vuong noted:

I think of more of as a type of, whoever could forage for the most resources will eventually win. That type of thing. And it's not, and it's not a disadvantage ... because it's on you. Rather than everyone else pushing you. That type of thing. (Vuong)

His words emphasize how the university—as a future-oriented space—places onus and responsibility on the student. In their analysis of neoliberal policies and widening participation, Bennett and Southgate (2014) assert there are two subject positions within Australian widening participation higher education policy: 'the cap(able) individual and the proper aspirant' (p. 22). Both positions, they argue, problematically privilege a narrow conception of an aspirational subject which echoes neoliberal prerogatives. Vuong, who attended an elite institution and performed the subjectivity of a 'proper aspirant', described university as a competitive space:

Yeah, at uni it's a bit more of a different culture. I mean, and there's always—you're always working together with other people for assignments and all of that, but there's still this, for me anyway, there's still this underlying aspect that out of uni we're still going to be competing for a job, like these are the type of people who are in the running alongside me, to get an employer's attention and all that, so there's still this underlying aspect that we might be friends and all that and work together today, but in the real world we might be not enemies per se, but just competing over how are we going to get an employer's attention, and that type of thing. (Vuong)

No longer in their close-knit secondary schools nestled in the working-class suburbs, the university was a space where the end goal was gaining full employment. Also, it was a space where the participants were

compelled to invest in forms of selfhood necessary for competition, to craft themselves accordingly.

Because it's very, I don't know, it's completely different, because you know everyone wants to be the best, that's why are they are there. They're going to the same career and all that stuff, so you know that one day they're going ... you're going to bump into them again [in employment]. (Dominic)

Everyone's—everyone works together, there's always study groups, people meeting up with each other. But at the end of the day—they're trying to get there for themselves. (Jacob)

Jacob's words suggest that the atmosphere was hospitable but there always existed an underlying tension which required him to be guarded. We are reminded here of the field of higher education as a '*space of conflict and competition*', in which individuals compete for various rewards and gains (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17, emphasis in original). Given the significant risk the boys in the study took in entering higher education and going against the grain, the desired end result of employability seemed high stakes; perhaps different to more affluent fellow students, employment carried with it the potential to validate their pathway. Having just had their pathways determined by their ATAR, the notion of being judged on institutional scores resonated with the boys as they considered the ways in which their credentials could determine their opportunities.

if you put in the work and have a fairly high GPA, so you work in a six GPA,<sup>1</sup> then you have a good chance of succeeding. But if you're rocking just like a stock standard five or four point five—which, five is okay ... But just say you get a four point five and know someone or [inaudible] someone, you're more chance of getting in than the bloke that's worked hard and got a six GPA, if that makes sense sort of thing. (Tobias)

Grades, especially the grades secured in the first semester, were particularly important in validating their pathways. Vuong, who held high

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<sup>1</sup>A Grade Point Average (GPA) is the average result of all grades and is calculated in Australia on a 7-point grading scale. 7 is the highest (HD), and 0 is the lowest (fail).

standards for himself, often reflected on his perceived underperformance at multiple points during his course of study:

It's not shameful, it's not like a fail. But it's not what I know that I can achieve. So that's why I am beating myself most of the time. Because I am being, I'm not even doing what I want to do. I want to succeed properly. Properly succeed. Not just go about passing. (Vuong)

Self-crafting is deeply influenced by the notion of an 'ideal student', what Wong et al. (2021) describe as 'desirable student characteristics, which may not exist in reality, particularly as one individual' (p. 2). Vuong, who was highly motivated and who was one of the few boys in the study to secure a place in an elite university, had a clear idea of what an ideal university student needed to be. His words suggest his frustration about not meeting this expectation and a desire not just to pass but to 'properly succeed', perhaps influenced by his awareness of being one of the only students in his course from a disadvantaged background.

One student, Robbie, despite receiving what seemed to be constructive and personalized support (see Stahl et al., 2020), struggled to ever fully become a 'proper aspirant' (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, p. 22). For Robbie—who did fail a course—his sense of success was more aligned with resilience and simply not giving up. His experience with failure dramatically impacted his sense of self and what he thought he was capable of achieving:

It depends what you count as success. I count success as while I'm still here and I'm still going. Some might say it's resilience but resilience is also a—kind of a form of success because you successfully fulfilled resilience in order to stay in uni. (Robbie)

Mallman (2017) writes: 'working-class university students bear the emotional weight of the separation of ability from resources as a personal hidden defect. The kind of person they want to be is one they fear they are not: intellectually capable' (p. 238). Both Robbie and Vuong suffered under an expectation that they would really capitalize on opportunity and make their families proud. Returning to Vuong and his experiences

at university, his sense of his own intellectual capability was also shaped by no longer being one of the few academically inclined students in his education context:

Yeah, exactly, the big fish in the small pond. So, now I'm still that same size fish, but in a much more larger pond, and yeah, so the environment is a bit different at uni and I feel like I'm expected to maintain a really high performance rating over my entire time at uni, so from first year to third year. So, that's a bit of stressor-ish. I'm trying to manage it, that along all the time, and all that. (Vuong)

Vuong's words suggest a struggle with both the academic work and his own sense of self in relation to his peers (see Stahl & Zhao, 2021 for more detail). The fast-paced, competitive university climate seemed to demand a lot of Vuong, reminiscent of Bonham et al.'s (2004) work on upwardly mobile African-American men who found their commitment to hard work resulted in various health issues related to long-term stress. Vuong spoke often of all-nighters and putting his body under duress in order to be competitive:

because everyone in my class is extremely good at maths, because you know, in the advanced class you have to be good at maths to be in that class. So, I don't feel—I feel a more laid back in regards to how I talk to my friends and all that from school, because you know, it's not like, there wasn't this sense of rivalry. But in uni it's a bit more now, because virtually everyone here in my class is a peer, like they can do the same things I can do, or better, and there's a little bit of pressure from that, but it's like a self-conscious thing, but I'm trying to work with it, just going, well, just because they're better than me at this aspect doesn't mean that I'm not better than them in some other aspect. (Vuong)

Not only do Vuong words highlight that he felt he needed to be on guard at university, we also see him moderating his sense of self through measuring his own strengths and weaknesses against the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the rest of the cohort. This reflects difficult identity work. Alexander's (2017, 2019) work on boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds highlights the ways in which disadvantaged young men

strategically perform a version of neoliberal selfhood that often masks their internal struggle, where ‘the line between performance and enactment was potentially blurry’ (Alexander, 2019, p. 59). Vuong’s words, arguably, provide us with a glimpse behind the mask of such a performance. While he was adept at maintaining the appearance of the successful neoliberal subject, there was internal struggle just below the surface. In considering how agents become socially mobile, Bourdieu (1984) writes of the ‘broken trajectory’ and ‘impossible objective potentiality, inscribed at the deepest level of their dispositions as a sort of blighted hope or frustrated promise’ (p. 150). Vuong, and others, had to come to terms with feelings of inferiority and—by proxy—inauthenticity. Destin and Debrosse (2017, p. 102) note: ‘As they work to reach academic goals that redefine their lives ... students must simultaneously work to maintain a coherent sense of status-based identity and its shifting components’ (p. 101). Certainly, as Vuong’s words suggest, his self-crafting was informed by how he perceived himself in reference to others, complementing research on how upwardly mobile males search for ‘acceptance, belonging and legitimacy’ and how they experience prolonged feelings of inauthenticity (Giazitzoglu, 2014, para 2.5). The next section seeks to outline some of dimensions of this internal struggle: how they *calibrate* and *regulate* the self.

## Calibrating and Regulating New Forms of Selfhood

In his work on neoliberalism and subjectivity, Ball (2006) calls attention to how ‘[w]e work on ourselves and each other, through the micro practices of representation/fabrication, judgement and comparison’ (p. 699). Identities are never complete but in formation, actively worked upon and produced through institutions. As the habitus enters into a negotiation with field and capital, students begin to internalize possibilities, engaging in a simultaneous process of resistance and acceptance. A divided habitus is in continual negotiation with itself, which produces a double perception of the self (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511). According to Christie (2009,



p. 131) the working class is more likely to experience university as ‘the process of identity formation [as a student] as one of emotional disorder and insecurity’. This is what Reay (2001, p. 339) calls ‘the difficult uncomfortable configuration of working classness with academic success’. Vuong described this: ‘I’m not that worried and not that stressed and all that, but there’s like this apprehensive type feeling in my head that I’m like, I think I’m not doing enough, or maybe I should try harder.’ Many of the participants reflected on their progress in relation to others and their perception of their future. In his work on the ‘reflexive project of the self’, Giddens (1991, p. 28) describes how self-narratives are formed through experiences as we seek to measure ourselves against socially constructed proxies. Selfhood is not simply realized, it always emerges through a process of symbolic legitimation (see Skeggs, 2004). With this in mind, this section focuses on how forms of selfhood are *calibrated* and *regulated* over time.

One facet of calibrating and regulating their identities was the boys finding ways to exorcise their own perception of laziness. In a previous project, *Life After School*, which focused on boys’ transition to the post-school year, we found the participants often ‘described themselves as “lazy” and “slack” with no evident sense that these were pejorative expressions’ (Nichols & Stahl, 2017, p. 173). Furthermore, the boys often presented an ‘easy-going’ social identity to mitigate against being seen as an outlier. The findings suggested that presenting this relaxed subjectivity carried a certain social currency among other males and that being viewed as working too hard was not seen as respectable or appropriately masculine. Similarly, many of the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* commented on frustrations with their own lack of motivation:

They kind of go on and off. My ... my laziness sets in and it’s like, I don’t want to do this anymore and stuff. I have less time, can’t play games and stuff, stuff like that. But I worked too hard to get here so I’m not giving it up and stuff like that. (Robbie)

I’ve got to stay on top of uni, so if I fall behind, well then, because I don’t have much time, I’m in big trouble. So I can’t be lazy, which is a barrier. (Levi)

I think it's just because, laziness is a factor. But I also think that without some sort of driving force to push me along that's not self-driving. Then it becomes really, really tough to actually push yourself. Because I mean, in school I had teachers who always pushed me along and all that. And then come uni, it's just me; it's just me trying to push myself along. (Vuong)

Vuong here implied that his laziness was inculcated in his secondary school, suggesting he was not prepared well for university and that his previous experiences made the acclimatization to university life all the more challenging. Mason struggled with his motivation, but did not seem overly concerned about this:

I mean I don't stress out too much with the work. I generally get along okay. Like I am not prodigy or anything but satisfactory at least from my point of view. So as I said the problem isn't if I can do it. I am pretty confident I can do it and most of the time I can, it's just actually go and do it at some point. (Mason)

Interwoven with laziness were struggles with procrastination and leaving work to the last minute. It is important to note here that, while many did leave the academic work too late, there were also examples of participants choosing between picking up an extra shift at work and investing the necessary time into university studies. The importance of money, therefore, did shape some of their decisions.

Sometimes. I usually—usually if I do it the day before, I usually get high-ish grades, like [distinctions] maybe, but then, I don't know, I usually never do it early because I usually just say, yeah, I'll get to it and then I won't get to it and then I get to it like the night or a couple of days before, but I will. (Manny)

Yeah, I think time management is the trigger of the other thing, bad study habits as a result of that, giving adequate time to my subjects, distractions, procrastination, etc. Things like that branch off from that. (Rashid)

Compounding the laziness and procrastination, it is important to consider the points raised in Chap. 4 concerning spoon feeding. Toward the

end of the first year Isaac reflected back on how poorly prepared he was for university life in terms of being able to organize his time:

Well, I've had to be more independent again just because they don't, the teachers don't actually, the lecturers and stuff don't actually do it for you. They don't tell you to hand up your assignments. They don't remind you. This is just all about you and making sure you know when it's due and stuff. (Isaac)

In their analysis of social mobility, Byrom and Lightfoot (2013, p. 816) posit that a 'habitus in tension' results when students' trajectories differ substantially from that of their parents. Students feel they cannot go back, but going forward presented its own challenges. The boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* all faced certain pressures, and how they responded to such pressures differed, showing a range of processes in and around acclimatizing to university life (Stahl & McDonald, 2022). Their self-crafting was informed by both their present realities as well as their sense of their futures, a process of calibration. Tobias, who was studying human movement, described his development as a learner primarily in reference to his time management skills:

Yeah. I feel like probably, I'm a bit more on-task, sort of thing. A bit more focus towards doing—so, my time management's probably improved a lot, because especially coming to the back end of that last semester that with assignments the—a couple of assignments that were due, having to get that done and having to revise for all the four subjects. So, I think that it's got me a bit more prepared for the years ahead, sort of thing, kind of helped me with time management of—oh, I have to do this and this. And coming to this semester, it's probably a bit easier, if that makes any sense. Yeah, that's what I reckon. (Tobias)

Tobias highlighted that he was able to acquire this skill and that he saw the acquisition as an integral skill for his future as a university student. The sense of a future self has thus informed how he calibrated, or crafted, his identity in the present. Giddens (1991) notes the self is something we make of ourselves, and performances of neoliberal selfhood carry the expectation that one will become an adept player in the game. In

studying the identity work of these young men, I consider how a working-class habitus must be transformed in order to align itself with middle-class contexts; now I shift focus to address how first-in-family males come to perform neoliberal subjectivities at university.

## Investing in New Forms of Selfhood

Seminal scholarship by Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 30) documents how working-class men enter into a process of untangling themselves from a working-class background, in the process having to ameliorate the feeling that they are betraying their origins. Extending this work in current times, recent scholarship has documented how working-class masculinities struggle with neoliberal discourses (Stahl, 2014; Cornwall et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2017). Documenting the identity negotiations of low-socioeconomic-status boys in the Bronx, Alexander (2019) explains that a ‘future neoliberal masculinity’ is grounded in the accrual of financial and symbolic capital. Alexander calls attention to the ways in which young men are strategic—operating often with limited capitals—in performing a version of neoliberal selfhood that often masks their internal struggle. Complementing this work, Giazitzoglu’s (2014) upwardly working-class males came to craft themselves and produce competitive subjectivities, aligning their dispositions through a strong identification with neoliberal ideology. As they secured white-collar jobs, they became boastful about what they had accomplished and rationalized becoming socially mobile through skill and hard work (Giazitzoglu, 2014, para 4.9). Both contemporary examples of studies of upwardly mobile working-class masculinities highlight how men come to invest in new forms of selfhood, or how they contend with ‘four Cs—change, choice, chances, and competition’ (Phoenix, 2004, p. 229), which require adaptation.

In his analysis of the durability of capital amongst the petite bourgeoisie, Bourdieu claims that those who possess enduring educational capital and strong cultural capital ‘enjoy a dual title of cultural nobility, the self-assurance of legitimate membership, and the ease given by familiarity’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 81). The boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* did not possess this ease and familiarity. In enacting new forms of selfhood,

they, therefore, adopted strategies to guard against a feeling of inauthenticity. After all, Giazitzoglu's (2014) research on upwardly mobile working-class males documents how their lack of 'exposure to the middle class habitus and "class rules" associated with affluent males' results in their performances being ill-informed, where they draw too heavily on the media as a main point of reference (para 8.5). In considering class as integral to one's sense of self, Lawler (1999) maintains that socially mobile women seek to 'de-stabilize' their working-class identities acquired in their origins in order to adopt a middle-class identity which, of course, still carries the 'sedimentations of an earlier habitus' (p. 17).

The majority of the boys attended their secondary schools for prolonged periods of time. These were sites where they established long-standing connections with their fellow students as well as their teachers. Nearly every boy in the study described the atmosphere at their school as friendly and stable. Within the new space of the university, they were compelled to make new connections with students (many of who came from very different backgrounds) and they also experimented with performing different subjectivities. One participant, Kinsley, described the new environment and how it brought forth different aspects of his persona that were previously latent or unrealized:

No, I think I have kind of—I actually, talking to my friend about this kind-of-ish but it's weird because at high school there is a social side of it—like the nerds or the uncool kids—like the popular kids—like a blend of all these kids, right, and they have like a reputation, whether it's in school or out of school. But at uni it's just such a clash of schools and personalities and ages and so it's like you really—if you want you can show a different side of yourself kind of at uni. Like you can portray yourself as, not as a different person to who you are, but you can really bring out who you are, kind of—it sounds a bit weird but I mean, because in primary school from what I remember, like, I was a real joke star and in high school that all changed because there's hierarchy and you wouldn't make a joke because you would be afraid that, you know, no one would laugh at it because no one would know you or whatever. But here no one really cares to be honest—you can just do whatever and everyone is chill with it. I don't know, I haven't really changed who I am or try to change my identity but maybe I have just brought it out. (Kinsley)

Kinsley's words remind us of how the social informs our sense of self. In Bourdieusian terms, '[s]ocial structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 14). For Kinsley, the university space provided a certain freedom away from the collective social history of his secondary school. Given this perception, dispositions that had remained dormant came to the fore. Furthermore, some of the participants spoke about having their aspirations reaffirmed and extended through their university study. For Samuel, who studied IT, his experience on the course led him to entertain how his skills could be transferred into the field of business:

like, since studying here we had a subject called Design Digital Innovation, something like that, along the lines of business and success. I really want to aim higher and perhaps at the end of my uni I want to work hard towards starting a business maybe. (Samuel)

Samuel, who seemed to know what counted in terms of his future employability, was steadfast in applying for every opportunity. He explained that his decision to attend university was influenced by guarding against precarity:

My decision was just security of getting a job. When I finish, I want—I actually want to get it into—get a job out of it. I don't want to have to have wasted my time learning that for nothing.

Samuel expanded on this further, explaining that he felt he needed to be proactive:

Yeah, so with security, that's why I'm motivated to get experience and apply for these internships as fast as I can and as soon as I can. I want to beat the others because, you know, especially IT, it's a pretty competitive field. (Samuel)

Part of what fuelled his aspirations was a desire to support his family ('cause like we're financially not there'), specifically his single mother, who was employed as a casual farm labourer. Samuel's present efforts to

craft an aspirational identity were also informed by his ‘professional projections of an ideal self’ (Shuker, 2014, p. 228; see also Alexander, 2019).

Another student, Avery, who described himself as growing up poor, and who out of all the participants worked the most hours during secondary school, found his experience at university only confirmed his commitment to making money: ‘Yeah, that’s still the goal in life. Isn’t that everyone’s goal really, is to make something of themselves, depending how they define that? I guess for me it’s money equals success’ (Avery).

Dominic’s sense of success was about money but also the enjoyment of what he was studying. Reflecting back on the decision to go to university, Dominic felt positive. Despite not making many friends or connections at university (‘I’m just kind of doing my own thing, just continuing my hard work’), being in the university space allowed Dominic to reaffirm his ‘hard-worker’ learner identity established in secondary school:

Yeah, I feel pretty confident what I am studying—I am enjoying what I am studying at the moment so I feel like I am confident that once I leave university that I will still be motivated to do what I want to do. So I feel like the course I’ve picked is good. In terms of going to university it’s a good decision. I have seen some of my old friends who have moved onto full-time jobs and getting a lot of money, but I just think about how much more money I will be earning once I finish my degree. (Dominic)

Linked via social media to their working-class former secondary school classmates, many of the participants were exposed to visual representations of the ‘quick money’ culture of those who were gainfully employed which, in some instances, did make them question whether they had made the right decision. Lehmann (2009a, 2009b) writes of working-class students having an instrumentalist attitude to gaining their university credential, seeing it as a necessary step to future employment. Overall, the experience of being at university—of taking a different and unfamiliar pathway—where they were surrounded by other people they perceived as ambitious motivated them to focus on planning for their future. Being enmeshed in the daily milieu of the future-oriented space of the university significantly influenced how they constructed their subjectivities, as they became aware of what was expected to be competitive in the labour

market. However, there were some instances where this actually occurred prior to commencing their university study. Before Lucas officially started at university, he described doing the groundwork in order not simply to be prepared, but to position himself advantageously:

but a lot of groundwork and a lot of planning in that for the future as well, so it was very productive as well, trying to get ahead of the game before it starts and that. And I think it really did help me because a lot of kids are like get into uni, or uni, it's like what do we do, what do we do? And that was within our degrees whether it be units, whether it be what's required and that, so because I did a lot of research ... (Lucas)

Lucas's words concerning 'being ahead of the game' suggest he felt he had a knowledge of the game. Within an era of neoliberal performativity, social identities are aligned to new logics concerning what is valued; many of these identities are fabrications: as Ball (2006) astutely notes, we are caught up in the game. In his first couple of weeks at university, Lucas did not struggle with the academics and, perhaps as a result, he saw university less as a rite of passage and more as foundational to his future success. Having excelled in his business course in secondary school, he portrayed his experience at university as developing a business model where he was the product:

it's just laying the foundations, it's not something that you can really just jump into university and start doing, it's a process. So this is establishing, it's the establishment phase, whereas your next—it's almost like a business cycle I guess. First stage is your establishment, then you've got your growth which is one to two years, and then your maturity's your third year where you're actually going out for jobs and actually trying to do things. And the same thing, that can be applied in the university/career sense. (Lucas)

Additionally, Lucas's words highlight that class is about 'being in the know' or 'knowing how to play the game', and Lucas seemed to have both a budding awareness as well as a keenness to become more proficient in learning these games.



While exposure to the university space was important, the often substantial travel to university worked to remove the boys from their working-class suburbs, allowing them to observe a wider diversity of lifestyles. Tyler, who was pursuing a degree in hospitality which brought him from the western suburbs of Sydney into the central business district, reflected on how his university experience and being in the central business district had influenced him:

I think I've definitely matured in a way just because I've seen, I feel like I've seen there's a smaller part of the bigger picture, I've seen—I'm in the city all the time now, so I'm seeing those type of people ... So even seeing all the people in the city and all the lecturers how ... students ... just all that professionalism. I just feel like I've gotten a little bit of that. (Tyler)

In terms of self-crafting, Tyler was one of the few students to set up a LinkedIn profile early on in the study, which he cultivated, celebrating his milestones as he proceeded through his degree. There were often images of him in a professional suit and tie winning awards, suggesting he was not only successful but that he knew how to self-craft himself in alignment with conceptions of white-collar success.

Central to investing in neoliberal forms of selfhood was a change in language which was apparent over the course of the study. One prominent example in the data was the use of the word 'networking', which did not appear in the interviews conducted when the participants were in secondary school:

Networks, very important. Just knowing people, putting yourself out there. Going to events. Because [my university] holds a lot of career events where you meet other lawyers, people who worked in that field. And to be able to go to those is a very good opportunity to network, introduce yourself. It is very important to have networks. (Jacob)

So, university has changed me in the fact that I feel like to be able to achieve my goal at the end, getting into a career and then having a networking structure so that I could actually ask for like, you know, lecturers to recommend me to companies and all that, that type of thing. I feel like my aggressive approach isn't going to cut it. (Vuong)

Vuong here recognized that his ‘aggressive approach’ to being a high achiever and securing the necessary academic capital was not going to be enough. He would need those in positions of power to supply increased access to social capital in order to ensure his success. This differs substantially from the subjectivity Vuong presented at the beginning of the study, which was more focused on gaining a respectable ATAR. At that stage, he relayed that his parents ‘thought that having a university degree would get me set up for life’. Lehmann (2009b) writes: ‘Lacking the social capital that guarantees (or at least eases) access to lucrative middle-class careers, working-class students have only human capital—in this case a professional, applied degree—to break into middle-class career paths’ (p. 144). Vuong now knows that ensuring his future success will involve more than his academic capital; furthermore, he will need to perform a version of selfhood in order to gain this additional capital.

Lucas, who invested heavily in self-marketing, found networks were a capital which led to other forms of capital. Early in his time at university, he was fortunate to secure employment clerking for a judge and, when I asked how it came about, he was clear that his networking was integral to this opportunity:

Just networking, presented myself, gave myself the—had a good resume and that, made sure I’ve already done stuff. And they were, ‘Yeah, we’ll give you [the job]—we think that you have the skills and tools and you have the experiences you need to do that.’ And I mean, that also is transpiring in uni whether it be ... I’ve joined a bunch of clubs ... you need to do that ... (Lucas)

Lucas’s prestigious job was a rarity and the majority of the boys secured simple service-sector work. However, how they accessed the employment was the same, drawing on either new acquaintances or their older networks through the social capital within their local communities. Elim, who was studying for a business degree, struggled more than any of the other boys to pick up service-sector work. It was a point of continual frustration for him. While he did eventually secure work at a petrol station, the anxiety around securing stable employment shaped his

subjectivity around what he wanted from his university experience, specifically in relation to increased networks:

I probably want to extend my network for people I associate with in terms of, like, professionally like that. I want to start expanding, so by the time I actually do need it, it is expanded enough ... That's the thing, I think when I start with the university teachers and see if they actually can network me, because I think I know one or two that did say something about knowing people working in areas like that. So, I must start with them and see if they can get me there and then I will probably see what goes from there. (Elim)

Dominic, who was studying engineering, found the expectation to network daunting and his words suggested a resistance to such practices. He had had no close interactions with any engineers prior to university and he described himself as shy. He said he had really only started to be outgoing toward the end of his time at secondary school:

Yeah, it's like there's a lot of people ... we have gone to field trips and stuff like that to meet civil engineers and stuff like that. So, I haven't spoken to them one to one but they have just talked to the class and stuff and people that really want to network with them have gone up to them. I just haven't got the confidence to go up to them and talk to them. I don't know ... I have really got to work on that. (Dominic)

Dominic's words here remind us of Shuker's (2014) work on self-marketing in university admissions which distinguishes between "reluctant" passive-internal students who unenthusiastically did what they had to, and "resistant" active-internal students who refused to tailor their image to external demands, out of principle' (p. 234). Dominic knew what he had to do—he knew the game—but struggled to self-craft around this particular form of selfhood. His habitus was engaged in a process of reconciling aspirations, a process of negotiation between the neoliberal expectations embedded in the higher education sector and the working-class values of being 'loyal to oneself' (Stahl, 2014).

## Conclusion

In focusing on the ‘injuries of class’, Sennett and Cobb’s (1972) definitive work describes the betrayal that is often a part of social mobility; furthermore, this work documents that many working-class men feel ambivalent when they successfully become middle-class and this ‘ambivalence they treat as a sign of vulnerability in themselves’ (p. 37). In later work Bourdieu (1984, p. 471) writes that people define ‘themselves as the doxic order defines them ... condemning themselves to what they have to be, “modest”, “humble” and “obscure”’. This chapter has focused on a segment of the data from the *First-in-Family Males Project* in which the boys presented subjectivities which were competitive and driven. Their words suggest university life entails a hustle, and an accrual of capital. This represents a significant change from when I first met them in secondary school in terms of how they understand the role of education in their lives. Furthermore, this adopted selfhood could work to mediate the injuries of class, or perhaps in adopting the identity performances of ‘the dominant middle-class culture that is increasingly characterized by selfish individualism and hyper-competition’ (Reay, 2013, p. 667) they are simply working to fit in.

In considering the performance of the entrepreneurial subject, I am interested in how social structures contribute to developing their subjectivities, as their habitus ‘resist and succumb to inertial pressure of structural forces’ (MacLeod, 2009, p. 139). The dialectic between field and habitus causes a push and pull, as the habitus struggles to reconstitute itself as it seeks coherency. The process of social mobility and the expectations around transforming oneself from a secondary school student to a university student can result in an emerging secondary habitus, a ‘cleft habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1999). This destabilized habitus allows students to adopt certain identities that are conducive to upward mobility while simultaneously maintaining their dispositions acquired in their habitus of origin. Ball (2006) writes: ‘Performativity works from the outside in and from the inside out’ (p. 694). With this in mind, entry to higher education serves as the first step of class dislocation where individuals come to aspire beyond their social status of their parents; it also serves as a liminal time of transition where students experiment with and invest in

new forms of selfhood as they come to make themselves in the university space. Ultimately, whether it is the structural barriers they encounter (money, transport, geography) or the identity barriers they negotiate, they are in a process of calibrating different versions of selfhood in order to position themselves advantageously.

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