Atrocity Stories and Access to Elite Universities: Chickens at the Station

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The article explores the interactional management of class relations using atrocity stories as a conceptual device vis-à-vis new case study data. We argue that interactionist ideas are well placed to comment on the hidden injuries of class in the higher education sector and demonstrate this using atrocity stories and Goffman's work. We use the atrocity stories of atypical cases (non-traditional graduates of an elite university) to expose class differences. Atrocity stories and Goffman's work on cooling, impression management, and total institutions were used here to unlock extended interviews with graduates from the 1960s–1980s who attended one elite British university. The findings expose the manifestation of the English class structure and a variety of responses. The conclusion finds evidence of resistance rather than challenge. A call is made for more longitudinal ethnographic research exploring how universities might promote access agendas — with particular attention to those both upwardly and downwardly mobile.
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INTRODUCTION

The article explores the interactional management of class relations using atrocity stories as a conceptual device vis-à-vis new case study data. First, the enduring debate about class inequality in access to higher education in the United Kingdom and many

other developed countries is outlined. Critically, the idea of the meritocracy (whereby everyone achieves to their ability, regardless of background) is now discredited in educational contexts (Goldthorpe 2016; Lehmann 2009). Second, we argue that class inequality in access to higher education has traditionally been examined at a macro level with limited interest in the mechanisms by which class exclusion is accomplished. The obvious exception to this is work by Young and associates in the 1970s (Young 1971). The article then makes its own contribution by, third, outlining and extending atrocity stories and using their articulation to examine the subjective experience of class across student careers at an elite university. We use these stories to illuminate how control is accomplished through everyday life in an elite university and, in doing so, enhance earlier 1970s micro analyses. Our conclusion suggests that the interactional management of social class injuries merits more longitudinal ethnographic study for both those upwardly and downwardly mobile and how we understand the road not taken (cf. Frost 1916).

HIGHER EDUCATION AND CLASS INEQUALITY

"Getting the very best students" regardless of background has been argued to be the challenge of the age (Cambridge University's former Vice-Chancellor quoted in *The Guardian* 2014). In the United Kingdom, post-compulsory higher education (HE) expanded dramatically from the 1960s onwards, following the recommendations of the Robbins Report.[1] Devolution has now created independent systems across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. From a time when only 5% of the population proceeded to HE, the 1990s Labour Government's goal of above 50% participation in post-compulsory education has been achieved.

Greater participation has not generated equity across the HE system:

> Every decade we swiftly declare we have buried class, each decade the coffin stays empty. (Hoggart 1989:vii)

> Going to a very posh university with very posh people made me feel like matter out of place. Marx, feminism and Bourdieu, however, enabled me to connect my shame and discomfort to how the world operated and provided me with life-long research questions, such as how some people can and want to invest their own superiority at the expense of others. (Skeggs 2015a:42–43)

Social class inequalities continue to be a *leitmotif* of the literature (Gumport 2007; Milburn 2014; Reay, David, and Ball 2001, 2005).[2] Research has demonstrated how elite institutions selectively marshal access via characteristics such as social class and ethnicity (Noden, Shiner and Modood, 2014; Zimdars, Sullivan, and Heath, 2009). Elite universities, such as Oxford, have been criticized for their treatment of BAME[3] intakes[4] and broader analyses have explored the role of private schooling in securing access to elite higher education institutions (HEIs) and future career success (Crawford and Vignoles 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014). Such research suggests that not only

is access to HE far from a level playing-field, but its impact reaches across the life-course. The mantra of "getting the best students" is more the subject of satire[5] than lived, demonstrable practice.

The analysis of such inequalities has come to focus upon the "true potential" of the individual and it is the individual who has become the dominant unit of analysis (James 2015). This is not due to any micro-sociological proclivities, but the permeation of neo-liberalism across HE. The student is now a consumer (of their education) (Ramsden 2003) and the metrics surrounding them matter. For example, the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees (currently £9250 per annum) has meant elite universities must now demonstrate equity in their access policies.[6] Metrics now permeate and dominate a massified HE system, for instance, via Discover Uni[versity] and Key Information Sets (KIS), the annual National Student Survey of all finalists, and the tracking of graduate destinations. Despite such a focus upon the individual, the interactionist community has been relatively quiet with the result that macro, quantitative analyses have come to dominate. A notable exception to this was the then "new" Sociology of Education of the 1970s, with its examination of the control *inside* the classroom (cf. Young 1971). In the present day, the system of arrangements within institutions lacks such scrutiny (James 2015) and the black box[7] or veracity of elite universities' claims that they secure the very best students regardless of background remains unchallenged. Indeed, some now suspect that HE may not have the capacity to be the hoped-for leveler of societal inequalities — arguably at the heart of broadening access debates (Crawford and Vignoles 2014).[8] In sum, the irony of Young's (1958) original work has been lost and even those scholars who expose the meritocratic fallacy are marketed in the self-same terms (cf. Elliot Major 2016; Reay 2017).

We now explore several interactionist concepts — and Goffman (1952, 1961a) showed the task to be a nuanced and complicated one — that may open up institutional habitus. More expressly, we focus on concepts that may show and expose when an individual meets an institution's expectations and the involuntary status adjustments made thereon.[9] This extends the legacy of the 1970 new Sociology of Education by addressing the neglect of micro mechanisms within the current literature on access to HE. By example, Lehmann's (2009) study of the Canadian context found working-class students at elite universities internalized neoliberalism. He suggested neoliberalism and the meritocratic tradition were complicit in positioning the individual student as the means to sustain the knowledge economy. Working-class students acquiesced to the system, rather than challenge it, as "their constructions of working-class moral advantages have to be consolidated with their ambition to enter the middle class" (Lehmann 2009:641). As an American scholar wearily observed, "as graduation events come and go this year, I see far too many of my student–customers ushered off the graduation stage with no clue as to what they have learned or why they have learned it" (Maril 2015:19).

We now explore the subjective experience of class at an elite university as articulated by students' atrocity stories. Atrocity stories are joined by concepts from the

work of Goffman (career, dramaturgy, and impression management).[10] We argue such interactionist concepts are well placed to examine how social class inequalities are both recreated and rendered invisible via techniques of interactional management. We summarize this theoretical toolkit before introducing the new data, beginning with atrocity stories.

ATROCITY STORIES

In their exploration of the doctor-patient consultation, Stimson and Webb (1975) used the term "story" to capture and explore power imbalances within the doctor–patient relationship (Stimson and Webb 1975:104). While they concurred that a "competence gap" exists between doctor and patient, they also argued that a doctor's knowledge is never complete and stressed the "personal autonomy" of both actors (Stimson and Webb 1975:31, 33). Stories act as a device for capturing the power dynamics of the relationship:

> The expression of criticism through the medium of story-telling allows grievances to be aired. It enables these incidents to be related whenever the opportunity arises and allows the *values* that they affirm to be reinforced. *Social reality can be constructed from a safe distance* where those on the "other side" do not have to be taken into account and they cannot themselves dispute that construction. (Stimson and Webb 1975:103–104; emphasis added)

Stories here take on a special character. They appeal to an interactionist reading of the social construction of society, as "it is in the telling the incident to others that the patient's unvoiced opinions and feelings can be brought to the fore and stressed. The patient is giving or compiling an account which in his terms and from his position is a more complete picture" (Stimson and Webb 1975:105). The analysis of these stories is therefore an opportunity to explore the definitions of those situations from the perspective of a witting but less powerful actor:

> These stories reaffirm amongst the teller and the audience the principles of appropriate behaviour for doctors and patients, and some of the problematic aspects of contact between patients and doctors. Criticisms of how a doctor did behave show how a doctor should behave. The patient is assessing and evaluating the doctor's behaviour and doing so amongst a group of others who are also patients from time to time. It is rarely possible in the setting of the professional–client encounters for the latter to show the former that he is forming his own decisions and passing his own judgements. (Stimson and Webb 1975:105)

Stories therefore merit both attention and analysis, but they do not constitute verbatim evidence (i.e., a conversation transcript). For example, nurses' or doctors' discussions of one another, if overheard, would not be recognizable from the actual encounters upon which they are based. This is exactly where atrocity stories' potential lies, as "in the patient's account of what occurred the actual events are embellished with opinions and judgements which *at the time* were introspective, or

were not formulated until after the event, when there had been *time to make sense of and evaluate* what happened. Not only is what was introspective made explicit and emphasised but the teller can reconstruct what did happen in terms of what he [sic] would have liked to have seen happen" (Stimson and Webb 1975:105, emphasis added). It is this *post hoc* quality that motivates their use here. Here, as for Stimson and Webb (1975), the properties of the original encounter are not the issue, but rather its reception and recounting in the eyes of the recipient.

Dingwall (1977) also used and developed work on atrocity stories. Researching healthcare professionals' socialization, he used such stories to unlock the power differentials of marginalized social actors and to view their responses to status hierarchies. Meeting others "may raise questions about the differential ability of groups to enforce their own versions of the world" (Dingwall 1977:374). In the context of his study, British public health nurses faced professional challenges from both senior medics and service users alike (Dingwall 1977). Hence their use of atrocity stories set up a taxonomy of difference that contrasted them with other healthcare professionals and in doing so provided a mutual recognition among those in similar situations.

Atrocity stories therefore possess the ability to expose control:

> We should expect to find such accounts wherever attempts are being made to control aspects of the life of some group by others whose justifications for such attempts are seem as illegitimate. *It is the legitimacy of the attempt [to control] which is important*. (Dingwall 1977:376; emphasis added)

We share Dingwall's (1977) interest in the attempt to control. Dingwall was highlighting whether such attempts were seen to be fair and reasonable. In doing so, both he and Stimson and Webb held up atrocity stories to be a property of the story rather than the original events.[11] Our understanding shares this reading and extends it. The original logic holds, but additional emphasis is given to the circumstances surrounding the mundane incident that elevated it into a story worth telling. This extension also echoes Stimson and Webb's emphasis upon the autonomy of the teller. The capacity of the less powerful actor to be witting and reflexive is also shared by Dingwall (1977). Like gallows' humor, stories can include mechanisms for relieving pressure, when "Those who see themselves as relatively powerless in a situation can redress the balance by stressing their own human and sensible qualities as against the comic qualities or stupidity of the more powerful" (Stimson and Webb 1975:107). Stimson and Webb's (1975) respondents, too, described the nickname of a doctor with a perceived predilection for internal examinations of female patients "The Stripper" (Stimson and Webb 1975:107). These two additions to atrocity stories are motivated by our case study. In a HE sector riddled with inequity, it can be assumed that many incidents of class injuries occur, but that they remain untold, hidden, or mundane.

Stimson and Webb's (1975) careful caveats therefore remain in place:

> Our interest has been in the way in which the stories are told and what this tells us about relationships between patients and doctors. Our concern is not with the "truth" of the criticisms that are voiced — whether, for example, an "objective

observer" would agree with the validity of the later account. *For the people who tell the stories they are real*. (Stimson and Webb 1975:110; emphasis added)

The use of atrocity stories is therefore an analytic technique to expose the interactional management of class inequalities. Further additions from the interactionist literature can also enhance the critical purchase of atrocity stories.

GOFFMAN

Stimson and Webb (1975) originally used Goffman (1959, 1961b) and two further additions are made here: Goffman's (1952) paper "On Cooling the Mark Out" and his (1961a) chapter in *Asylums* on the moral career of the mental patient. These directly add breadth (an actor's sense of encounters *across* their career), depth (the social situation of encounters), and detail (how social actors themselves manage potentially discrediting losses of face or status). All are concerned — like atrocity stories — with the general and basic social phenomenon of alterations to conceptions of self.

Goffman (1952) traced the myriad of sifting and sorting mechanisms that the "mark" encounters while being "cooled" after being conned. It is ultimately an account of how "the mark is given instruction in the philosophy of taking a loss. [. . .] This is a process of self-destruction of the self" (Goffman 1952:453). This is a nuanced, intriguing, and not always bloody process, given that "there is a norm in our society persuading persons to keep their chins up and make the best of it — a sort of social sanitation enjoining torn and tatter persons to keep themselves packaged up" (Goffman 1952:462). Goffman (1952) detailed the process by which the mark is identified, kept warm, conned and the very stages of "self-destruction." He exposed the sheer variety of techniques employed by the cooler to assuage the mark so that the latter might "quietly go home" (Goffman 1952:452). The emphasis on process is relevant here:

> As one might expect, a process of sifting and sorting occurs by which the socially dead come to be effectively hidden from us. This movement of ex-persons throughout the social structure proceeds in more than one direction. (Goffman 1952:464)

Operators around such persons — Goffman's coolers, Dingwall's doctors — are therefore explicated in hiding such mechanisms. May we find the actors surrounding working-class students in elite universities act similarly? May we see the selling of consolation prizes, whereby "a student of medicine may be asked to switch to the study of dentistry" (Goffman 1952:458)? Goffman's (1959) later highlighted the very fragility of the self during encounters with unfamiliar actors:

> Knowing that his [sic] audiences are capable of forming bad impressions of him, the individual may come to feel ashamed of a well-intentioned honest act merely because the context of its performance provides false impressions that are bad. Feeling this unwarranted shame, he may feel that his feelings can be seen; feeling that he is thus seen, he may feel that his appearance confirms these false

> conclusions concerning him. He may then add to the precariousness of his posi-
> tion by engaging in just those *defensive manoeuvres* that he would employ were
> he really guilty. In this way it is possible for all of us to become fleetingly for
> ourselves the worst person we can imagine that others might imagine us to be.
> (Goffman 1959:236; emphasis added)

Going up to university would be one such example of heightened anxiety. Goff-
man's defensive maneuvers, like the gallows' humor of some atrocity stories, provide
a proactive means of shoring up self. Goffman (1959), for example, describes those
Shetlanders approaching the hotel and arranging their comportment prior to enter-
ing. What impression management may those feeling like a fish out of water in an
elite university be able to successfully deploy? Last among Goffman's conceptual
schema appealed to here is his argument that mental institutions demand a moral
loosening of their inmates. That is, hospital's organizational arrangements — despite
what can be a sincerity in motive — force a "shameless game" upon inmates (Goff-
man 1961a:151). Mechanisms included the status of the psychiatric profession; the
ward system; and its temporality or state of flux. He exposed techniques such as
"bugging" (verbal assaults, constant discrediting work by staff); back room gossip
and "information control"; and the "physical facts" of the living arrangements
(e.g., the ward system's regular movement and adjustment of inmate's sleeping
arrangements) (Goffman 1961a:146). He traced how actors were affected and their
adjustment to the code and its operator and even its occasional suspension or
"moratorium" (Goffman 1961a:152). This constituted a "new plateau" of where
fantasy met fact across what he termed inmates' moral careers (Goffman 1961a:152).

The viewing of mechanisms of social control (such as bugging) is where, for
Goffman, the sociological value lies. Core themes of all three of these examples
from Goffman's work are career *stages* (acquiescence, failure to capitulate) and
the "line" or defensive response of the mark or inmate (their stories, successful
or sad) (Goffman 1961a). While there is a flavor of negativity to Goffman (1961a)
in his conclusion that the institutional frame was dominant,[12] when combined the
"line" and stages of career allow for analyses of actors' strategies and potential clues
regarding their presentations of self.

Goffman's contribution lay with his exposure of the workings of the micro sphere
(Bourdieu 1982). To use Goffman's metaphor, the spaces or cracks between the build-
ing blocks of society are where identity resides. Of course, that alienating and morti-
fying processes lead to new beliefs and a new self is not unique to mental hospitals or
con rackets. Therefore, we use atrocity stories with these additions from Goffman to
unlock the workings of a contemporary institution — the ivory tower of an elite uni-
versity. Our empirical findings may, in turn, advance Goffman's conceptual schema.

METHODS

Qualitative research techniques are a well-established approach to the study of
elites in educational settings (Allan and Charles 2014; Delamont 1984; Khan 2010;

Maxwell and Aggleton 2016). Our focus was upon those like Skeggs in an "anomalous position" in an elite HE, namely, non-traditional graduates (Dingwall 1977:374). Our sample was drawn from a British elite[13] collegiate university—Bodkin[14] University—in the United Kingdom. Bodkin was a Sutton[15] 13 (Social Mobility Group 2013) and Russell Group[16] University. A sample (N = 12) was sought that reflected the variety of colleges,[17] in the interests of instantiation rather than generalization. Recruitment included word-of-mouth and the university's alumni and professional services team. Following ethical approval, interviews took place in offices, restaurants, and coffeehouses. The first author conducted all of the interviews. All were digitally recorded and transcribed. The names of respondents and some locations have been changed to protect confidentiality.

The data was analyzed vis the principles of analytic induction (Hammersley 1992). Emerging from the interviews were encounters of the kind articulated by Skeggs—atrocity stories. Unstructured interview data has limitations—namely that interviews reveal more about what participants say they do than what they actually do:

> Such interviews only provide data on what [doctoral] supervisors think they do and are prepared to rehearse in front of researchers. [. . .] Narratives and other kinds of accounts are a pervasive feature of social life, and are fundamental to everyday practical action. They have their own organizational features and regularities. We certainly cannot treat them as "transparent." (Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry 2000:135−6)

A common feature of the interviews was that they contained atrocity stories. Rather than treat such stories as "facts," they are treated—in keeping with Delamont's et al.'s perspective—as what graduates later made of their encounters with controlling mechanisms. To repeat Stimson and Webb (1975:105), "it is in the telling the incident to others that the patient's unvoiced opinions and feelings can be brought to the fore [. . .] [they are] giving or compiling an account which in his terms and from his position is a more complete picture." The focus here is upon the cooling process, rather than with the con itself. Therefore the interview data is treated in-keeping with Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry's (2000) perspective.

BODKIN AND CHICKENS AT THE STATION

Bodkin had a significant footprint in the city and its students dominated the city. For example, on Open Days the unsuspecting visitor or pre-patient might encounter students in fancy dress at the railway station ready to greet prospective students (e.g., dressed up as chickens, as captured in the title). This demonstrated the very grip of the university on the city and that its system of arrangements may appear strange elsewhere—finding students dressed as chickens at the station—were routine at Bodkin.

Collegiate systems operate at five of the Sutton 13 Universities, serving as residences, pastoral support systems, or providing teaching—or all three. Bodkin's

academic departments and colleges were geographically spread across the city and blended the iconic with the iconoclastic. All were within walking distance, with older colleges towards the heart of the city. Not all colleges required residence, but students remained associated with the same college throughout their university career. Therefore, college membership held "master status" among students — above the subject(s) they were reading. College allocation was therefore significant and applicants could indicate which college they wished to join. Bodkin's self-categorization of its colleges was by location, as traditional or new, by size, and whether catered or self-catered. Where applicants indicated no college preference, allocations were formerly made at departmental level.

The cohort studied here selected their university at a time when relatively new Universities — such as Warwick (est. 1965) — sat alongside the vestiges of older, established institutions. The accounts and representations discussed here are of that era and a therefore snapshot of institutional arrangements at Bodkin that no longer exist. As Warwick University's former Registrar Mike Shattock noted after that university's first 25 years, *all* universities have adjusted significantly (Shattock 1991). Next, their emerging atrocity stories are discussed.

EARLY ENCOUNTERS

Three of the participants' first encounters with Bodkin were at their admission interview (Roger, Grenville, and Patrick). They had not visited beforehand, but applied on the basis of academic reputation or recommendation by their school. This was the beginning of their "line" (e.g., as either happy or sad) of their university careers. James, Sheila, and Roger enjoyed the attractiveness of the location and the latter had wanted to avoid a big city. "I liked the feel of it because it was . . . it was a town, it felt to me like it was a big town because I came from a village where only fifteen hundred people lived, so you know, anything looked big. The school I attended had four hundred pupils and Bodkin seemed vast" (Roger). A dislike of campus universities also played a part, Aaron and Sheila mentioned disliking the rain and snow at York and Warwick ("feels like I'm in some sort of gulag") University campuses respectively. Piers joined an older college and positively recalled an address by the principal (head of college) that membership was for life. Telling a happy line, Piers was in his "comfort zone" due to familial links to the university that countered their comprehensive schooling. These were less atrocity stories than successful maneuvers shoring up self at a fragile moment of transition.

The transition did provoke jolts of surprise or encounters with established actors in the Bodkin institution that spilled out into non-university settings. Patrick, from traditional Catholic grammar in London, had been the first in his family to attend university. Visiting the city for the first time for interview, he found the layout "bewildering" at first:

> I remember going into the Ostrich pub and I realized afterwards, on Newgate, just went for a walk in the evening and I realized, I didn't know it at the time, but I

> realized Beckett [College] had a singsong in there that particular evening, when-
> ever it was, and I just stood watching these students singing jolly songs and one
> of them would stand up and do a little solo and there was a lot of back-slapping.
> (Patrick, French UG, Beckett College, late 1960s)

He explained that although Beckett College's reputation was very liberal, it "was
still very Bodkin." This "Bodkin-ness" or traditionalism/conservatism is where more
potentially hard-hitting encounters with key operators occurred, such as in Sheila's
college interview:

> Edward's College, which was then an all-girls college and I can't remember who
> the principal was then but she kind of took one look at me, I think [laughs] and said
> "Perhaps you should have an interview at Beckett's." And so, I had an interview
> at Edward and then she arranged for me to have an interview at Beckett College
> probably because I was not living at home because my parents had had to move
> so I'd had a year kind of living in digs while I finished my A-Levels,[18] which at
> that time, of course, was a very strange thing to do. (Sheila, Anthropology UG,
> Beckett College, mid 1970s)

Goffman (1961a) stressed the controlling implications of institutional arrange-
ments. These early encounters were not mortifying but were sifting and sorting mech-
anisms. They demarked who should be there ("a member for life") and in what kind
of college ("very Bodkin" or otherwise). Sheila had been cooled without detriment
("perhaps [. . .] an interview at Beckett's") by the operator (college principal) and
"the applicant [. . .] not given a chance to invest his self unwisely" by joining a tra-
ditional college (Goffman 1952:461). Some encounters were banal, such as Roger
on their first day who struggled with the local accent when they asked for directions
to their lodgings. By contrast, some early encounters required immediate defensive
maneuvers:

> At the time the principal was a cleric and I got there to be told they were run-
> ning late, I would have to wait and they would put someone with me to show me
> around the place a little bit and I got an apprentice vicar. [. . .] So clearly I'm
> wanting to make a good impression but I just didn't know how the hell to do it.
> I'm talking to someone whose accent I still can't believe [. . .] it really unsettled
> me because I just, I couldn't get on a wavelength with this bloke at all. And, you
> know, to me "Religion is the sigh of the repressed creature, the heart in the heart-
> less world, the spirit in the spiritless situation, it is the opiate of the people" and
> he's an apprentice vicar. (Graham, Sociology UG, Beckett College, 1970s)

Like Goffman's inmates, these students were "coming out" into the institu-
tion's system of arrangements. In another light, they were being warmed up by
the operators wielding significant authority within their new social environment.[19]
Two metaphors work well here: David Lodge's academic novel *Small World* on
globe-trotting academics and the *Daily Telegraph's* translation guide of "weaselly
Brit-speak" for Europeans (Philipson 2013).[20]

New students, such as Sheila who already saw the world as a smaller place, and/or
had links to Bodkin required less "de-coupling" from their pre-institutional selves.

She had translated Bodkin's "weasely speak" and was not offended by being offered a place at Beckett (not Edward) College. Likewise, James, had prior experience of Bodkin, having stayed in college as a fourteen-year-old during a residential table-tennis tournament. Roger's tutor at school was an "all right" Bodkin graduate and had recommended Bodkin, foreshadowing his application. After Simmel, the *content* of these associations varied but the *form* was the same — straightforward "early adjustments" to Bodkin's arrangements and positive story lines.

ATROCITY ENCOUNTERS

Atrocity stories are a mechanism for revealing participants' interpretation of encounters and provide clues as to subsequent identity shifts. In educational settings, prospective pupils used atrocity stories to help manage the transition to a new school. For example, pupils dismissed the story that school dinners have fisheyes in the peas by retorting that they do not eat peas anyway (Pugsley, Coffey, and Delamont 1996). The atrocity stories emerging at Bodkin showed encounters of the kind that disrupted participants' selves, such as where it becomes "possible for all of us to become fleetingly for ourselves the worst person we can imagine that others might imagine us to be" (Goffman 1959:236; emphasis added). Some employed humor, as "one detracts from the power of the person by making him the subject of laughter or scorn" (Stimson and Webb 1975:107). More negative accounts revealed participants' defensive maneuvers. "Atrocity" story is a strong term, but it is merited because such stories can reveal mechanisms of social control in the reproduction of class in HE.

Doctoral student Grenville had immediately found college life in the 1960s too conservative and sought membership of what they termed the "least Bodkin college." Given the college system's master status at Bodkin, this was the equivalent of stepping outside of the institutions ward system — a pivotal mechanism of control. They had both metaphorically and literally avoided eating the peas. Jennifer likewise "found college life extremely insular and very stifling and not at all interesting or intellectually inspiring and [. . .] and I found the women tedious [. . .] the only good thing about Stanhope College was that . . . in the first year you had to share a room with someone else and they put me in with a working-class girl, from Birmingham, who had her wits about her and she was my saviour really." These stories showed defensive maneuvers that avoided Bodkin's "bugging" and where they had avoided being shifted and sorted into a future mark. Yet accounts remain pejorative and, *in extremis*, other atrocity stories constituted the mark's response to when the operator themselves was a carrier of the interactional management of class differentials, as opposed to Jennifer's savior (Goffman 1961a:152):

> One evening I'd invited him [a student friend] through to where [wife's name] and I were living in [local suburb]. It was the council house that she grew up in

[. . .] we have a meal and we go out and have a few pints in the pub and had a really nice evening and he comes back and he stays the night. And then the following morning [. . .] he said "Oh, there's something I've been meaning to ask you." I said "Yeah," he says "I've been wondering, where do you live?" And I just, I couldn't understand the question, I mean he'd just stayed at our house . . ."Where do you live?" I said "What are you on about?" he said "I'm curious to know where you live" I said "[friend's name], you've just stayed here" and he reacted as if I was complete idiot, he said "Oh no, no, no, I don't mean your student house I mean where do you really live?" And that sums up, you know, again that two worlds thing. You know, he was a Dutch bloke, he didn't have the snobbery that some of the rahs[21] have, it wasn't in any way malicious [. . .] [the] world that he inhabited was a very different one to mine. I mean his dad was an internationally-known heart surgeon, he would fly round the world and do operations and stuff like that. So, he couldn't conceive that someone would really live in a council house and perhaps be a student at Bodkin. (Graham, Sociology UG, Beckett College, 1970s)

Participants had applied and accepted a place at Bodkin. In that sense, they were already inside their "ideal sphere" where they wished to be, unlike Goffman's in-patients who had been sectioned (Goffman 1959:69). This left them more exposed to atrocity encounters, such as those above, as their situation was one they has sought out rather than been imposed upon them — they could occur even in their own home.

Goffman (1961a) argued total institutions force a de-coupling from the self that society gave them. In his earlier paper, he traced what it might take for someone who has been conned to accept their lot and "quietly go home" (Goffman 1952:452). Goldthorpe's (2016) social class analysis identified a peak period of upward mobility, which was when the majority of the sample attended Bodkin (1960s–early 1980s). The participants were aware of this "extraordinary [. . .] social mix" (Patrick). Their responses and strategies to Bodkin as a route for upward mobility varied. Lehmann's (2009) sample had found solace in their studies, but among our respondents commitment to academic work varied. One described his undergraduate degree "was of little significance to me" (James) whereas a graduate who arrived in the early 1970s described a passion for his subject he found singularly lacking among his peers (Graham). Atrocity stories give clues as to the mechanisms — both soft and hard — that sit beyond academic ability and which Bodkin's system of arrangements contained.

Goffman (1961a) used the term de-coupling to capture the strong disjuncture between the pre and post institutionalized selves, but he had also shown (Goffman 1952) the cooling process to be highly nuanced and potentially unwitting. Our study revealed participants' responses to encounters with extreme privilege via their atrocity stories. Patrick had been invited to a drinks reception in London by a friend who was the son of a government minister. On arrival, they were asked their name and formally announced to the gathering. This was stark sifting and sorting — they had been working on a building site that summer — prompting awareness they were a fish out of water. While they were not forced adjustments to their self-identity,

such as where they had lost money (been conned) or labeled insane, such encounters were nevertheless revealing. As Sheila put it, "I was kind of unaware really that they existed, to be honest, you know, like really posh schools."

Goffman (1959:13) argued that "society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way." He also highlighted the "shameless game" an institution can impose on its inmates (Goffman 1961a:151). Class mortification mechanisms reached outside the Bodkin system of arrangements and, like St. Elizabeths, implicated family members. One local mature student, who had given up an apprenticeship to attend Bodkin, had his mother express concern that they might "overreach themselves" (Graham). Familial mechanisms were felt significantly, as were key agents of social control inside Bodkin, such as admissions tutors. Jennifer, who in her own words was somewhat "cussed," responded more directly to when their moral right to be treated more appropriately was breached at Bodkin. Rather than accept becoming a mark, they themselves employed "weaselly speak" to respond to an alienating encounter:

> I can remember the department interview . . .very supercilious man, disdainfully looking down his nose at me . . .so I got a bit provoked by that and he said, you know, "What's your family background?" and I said "Oh, we're peasants" and he said "Well, under what definition do you call yourself peasants?" and I said "Peasants are people who do agriculture by hand" and we were experimental growers [. . .] all done by hand, everything was done by hand. So, I said "We're un-mechanised farmers who work by hand" and he fell off his chair and anyway I got in [laughs]. [. . .] In my department there was absolute rampant misogyny, which I should have realized from the interview but that was just absolutely stunning, I'd never met such negativity before, disdainful negativity, undermining feeling that, you know, you could never, ever win with this lot, you were going to be undermined whatever you did. And that was outrageous to me and totally baffling, I'd never encountered anything like it before and just didn't know what to do with it. (Jennifer, History UG, Stanhope College, late 1960s)

Jennifer had refused to be cooled by Bodkin's operators' techniques of control (undermining negativity). Participants' atrocity stories showed how they avoided capitulation. They did not leave, but neither did they stay quietly. Their stories ranged from surprise to outrage and other defensive maneuvers included diversionary activities (such as societies) and complete avoidance (refusing to attend "penguin suit" formal dining [Jason]). They reveal mechanisms for coping — not cooling — within Bodkin that protected their "ideal sphere" (Goffman 1959:69). Friendship networks, already referred to above, provided such a space:

> The time when I came through as an undergraduate [. . .] there was that critical mass of mature students that were here, you know, so when we'd had a belly full of it and, you know, there was people that you could go and rant at who knew what you were ranting about and that made a hell of a difference. (Graham, Sociology UG, Beckett College, 1970s)

Isobel graduated in the mid 2010s and was allocated a traditional college. They recounted a formal dinner, whereby heavy drinking rituals led to a smashed smartphone and they had considered leaving the university at the end of their first year. Their defensive maneuver was to live out in their second year with a different group of friends.

Goffman (1961a) described when inmates acceding to the institutions' requirements of them as "coming out." Bodkin's "physical facts" and dominance of the city prompted the inverse from participants. They sought escapism as a means to avoid "coming out" or going native:

> At the very start, the very start, I thought "What the hell have you done?" you know, "Where have you come to?" you know, "What's this going to be like?" because it was so alien. [. . .] I quite quickly was able to make some pretty good solid friends, [. . .] one of my mates, [friend's name], very unusually he had a car, so one of the things he used to do was just drive out of Bodkin and go to other places like Poppleton, or go out into Bantshire, little villages and what else, get out of the place for a while. (Aaron, Psychology and Sociology UG, Cosin's College, 1980s)

Bodkin was a total institution. Atrocity encounters occurred both in and outside its formal arrangements. Hence finding the right form of consolation where their self-image and status *are* supported involved some trial and error:

> I made the mistake of trying to go to the Bodkin Union to a debate and [. . .] the rest of debates I went to was just small boys pretending they were going to become Conservative MPs, well some of them did. Obnoxious name-calling and nastiness to each other. (Jennifer, History UG, Stanhope College, late 1960s)

Colleges' master status meant they were significant harbingers of techniques of social control. Yet Bodkin was more permeable than St. Elizabeths and allowed diverse responses such as finding space or societies to invest identity elsewhere, where "you find people that are like you, so I didn't really mix with that crowd" (Sheila). This was distinctive from the fallen mark finding a (lesser) place for themselves once again in society. While the majority of respondents specified aspects of the college system that they disliked (N = 8), the colleges differed from Goffman's (1961a) ward system. In the latter, the regular physical movement of inmates was a controlling device. At Bodkin, regular movement offered physical and mental temporary or alleviating respite from being both bugged and cooled. This even could come from the keyholders themselves, such as "the pivotal moment" of finding a good tutor (Sheila).

DISCUSSION

Our article used atypical cases (non-traditional graduates of an elite university) and their atrocity stories to expose class differences. Interactional management

techniques of social control often remain hidden, but were exposed via our use of stories and Goffman alongside new data:

> One of the things that I think about Bodkin, looking back now, is that I really got a good, direct, first-hand view of class, in a way that I wouldn't have got if I'd have gone to Poppleton or Rummidge or Bantshire.[22] It was quite hard emotionally, politically [. . .] I remember, distinctly remember saying to myself, "Look, they can't help it, it's not their fault. I'll give them a month and see." And so I did suspend judgement for a month and then confirmed, yeah, a lot of them are tossers [laughs]. [. . .] This was Nineteen Eighty, high point of Thatcherism [. . .] so, you'd got Hooray Henry types, the loads of money characters, just revelling in being rich. (Aaron, Psychology and Sociology UG, Cosin's College, 1980s)

The atrocity stories articulated here found resistance rather than the capture Lehmann (2009) identified. Goffman (1961a) had identified a "new plateau" of arrangements that total institutions impose upon their inmates. Bodkin's new plateau consisted of the college allocation process; interviews[23]; student sub-cultures; dominant codes of conduct in colleges; and their physical arrangements (shared rooms; formal dining; teaching in departments).

Participants had the capacity to avoid the kind of acquiesce Goffman's St. Elizabeths demanded. While this is a key finding, it must be tempered, namely, by further appreciating that the coping mechanisms used by those at Bodkin *do not challenge the conditions or dominant definition of the situation*. Rather, atrocity stories fulfill a mutually-supportive role (Dingwall 1977) as "one of the consequences of it is that you found another person like you [. . .] like a subcultural response [. . .] to the Bodkin-ness" (Aaron, Psychology and Sociology UG, Cosin's College, 1980s). This has also been recognized in the application of Bourdieu's ideas — a negativity[24] to such analyses of social mobility and education. Atrocity stories share that tendency:

> Story-telling is significant in terms of social control. It is both an appeal to action. But at the same time an appeal to inaction. [. . .] Conflict is expressed not to the other actor in the situation, but to others who have no, limited, or very little power to do anything. A kind of fatalism is implicit. [. . .] In the stories there is very little that the individual can do to alter the course of events. Dissatisfaction becomes dissipated. Inaction is the result. The client constructs a verbally powerful assault upon the professional from a safe distance. He does not direct criticisms and complaints at a source of authority where they may be effective in realistically bringing about some redress or change, but shares them with others on the "wrong" side of the professional–client line, other "sufferers of the system." (Stimson and Webb 1975:111–112)

This caveat to the findings is important, given that "revelling in being rich" endures (Aaron). Extremes of distance between the wealthiest top 1 % and the rest of the population continue (Docherty 2014; Sutton Trust 2019) and operate upon an interactional level. This is what Runciman (2013) identified as "a growing sense of impunity among small networks of elites. As British society has become more

unequal it has created pockets of privilege whose inhabitants are tempted to think that the normal rules don't apply to them" (Runciman 2013:170).

Stimson and Webb's (1975:11) original study of going to the doctors noted that no one ever made a formal complaint to a professional association, such as the British Medical Council (BMC). (Someone wrote to the Executive Council of the BMC but left the letter unposted on the mantelpiece.) A summary and final conclusion now reflect upon the findings and what a critical friend of Bodkin may wish to change in a constructive manner, rather than leave it sitting on the mantel.

SUMMARY

Our article described the interactional management of class distinctions via atrocity stories. In doing this, we contribute to an understanding of the maintenance of social class hierarchies. The initial stories our respondents told were benign, merely exposing new in-patients' cultural knowledge gaps — from the mis-understanding of local accents to bun fights at formal dinners. A second tier of participants' recollections revealed their defensive maneuvers. These maneuvers included supportive friendship groups and living or traveling out. Such secondary adjustments perpetuated the *status quo*, as most fell into the category of "bewildering" encounters rather than the kind of symbolic violence Skeggs (2015b) argued young working-class women face. Therefore, they serve to reinforce exclusion. Put simply, working-class applicants to elite universities need to over-perform to the equivalent of an A-level grade (Boliver 2013) and then forcibly adjust via defensive maneuvers (Goffman 1959) upon entrance. As Aaron recounted of his first week, he was asked repeatedly by a fellow student what school he went to — that student assuming all of Bodkin's entrants were from independent[25] schools. (Aaron attended a comprehensive.) Like the system of double doors in older Oxbridge colleges, Bodkin non-traditional applicants had to get through not one, but two closed doors.

A core argument of the article was that the interactional consequences of "very Bodkin" moments are misrecognized:

> There was a critical mass of public school educated kids at Bodkin, from memory it was something like about sixty-five percent and that is a real critical mass because those people tend to suck the air out of the atmosphere [. . .] you'd have to be incredibly confident, whatever social class you were, to stand up against that [. . .] those people have a privileged position and yet they're sort of, in places like Bodkin, they're super-exercising it, they're super-exercising their privilege, at the expense of other people. (Jason, Sociology and History UG, Beckett College, 1980s)

The article has shown the value of atrocity stories to expose what was previously normalized — such as finding chickens at the station. Alongside elements of Goffman (1952, 1959, 1961a), atrocity stories exposed that it is "the legitimacy of the attempt [to control] which is important" (Dingwall 1977:376). Every "patient"

recounted an atrocity story, but this new plateau included obliviousness and positive stories:

> The fantastic thing about the college system is, as you know, is that ...and clearly it wouldn't work for everybody but you did immediately feel a sense of community. [...] Very quickly you get to know everybody in your college, its cross-disciplinary situation so it's, you don't just hang round with historians, home of the beard [laughs] [...] You felt as though there was always somebody there who was going to support you and pick you up. (Eleanor, UG History, Cosin's College, late 1980s, who had not indicated a college preference at application)

Bodkin constituted a total institution and its colleges were complicit. A key finding was the sheer variety — of both atrocity encounters and response — some prompted reflexivity and others penetrated participants' "ideal sphere" (Goffman 1959:69). This plateau is where opportunities for remedial action may lie. Comprehending the plateau's impact upon a student's unfolding career is critical in understanding how total institutions may become less egregious — less totalizing — in their impact upon identity.

CONCLUSION

Atrocity stories capture the scoring of class injuries and the interactional management of class relations. Our findings identified that non-traditional entrants faced such encounters at all phases of their careers: in college, at interview, down at the pub, at college dinners, in society — and from tutors, family, and friends. The results furthermore suggested that earlier networks or associations mitigated the transition and an array of responses to "Bodkin-ness" were possible. The latter included distancing and mechanisms acts, such as evading college life and spaces and the peer-group support.

The sample consisted of Bodkin graduates and as such does not speak to the negative case — those who rejected or were rejected by Bodkin. Pivotally, the sample here avoid rather than reform or challenge the system. The contribution of this article is less to provoke revolutionary change than to unravel Bodkin-ness and how discovering students dressed as "chickens at the railway station" is normalized. What is alienating is individually, culturally, and temporally relative, as the stories told here displayed. More work using atrocity stories is merited looking beyond class, into inequalities such as gender, ethnicity, and the ecological dominance of universities in (and for) their locales.

Atrocity stories were here a productive medium for studying careers, but can invite story-telling. Conducted in hindsight, they can include the "unmentionables" that interviews conducted during their university careers may not (Delamont 1991:240). Our respondents recounted both stories of negotiation and navigation *and* rationalizations of decision-making and the road taken. Indeed, for all those interviewed here, Bodkin was part of a success story — or was framed as such — atrocity stories

notwithstanding.[26] But, as Goffman (1952) reminded us, movement within the social structure is both upward and downwards:

> No doubt there are few positions in life that do not throw together some persons who are there by virtue of failure and other persons who are there by virtue of success. In this sense, the dead are sorted but not segregated, and continue to walk among the living. (Goffman 1952:463)

Maxwell and Aggleton's (2016) work on cosmopolitanism could be taken to suggest HEIs might fulfill a different role for the privileged. The study of elites is sociologically neglected. We need longitudinal ethnographic insight into the operator (those who dressed as chickens), as well as the mark. How status is maintained is as sociologically significant as when it is lost. What story might they tell?

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NOTES

1. In 1960 there were eighteen universities in England. This figure doubled within ten years.
2. Note the language shift — from a meritocracy towards the achievement of students' "true potential" (May 2019).
3. BAME is an abbreviation for black, Asian, and minority ethnic.
4. For example, see http://itooamoxford.tumblr.com.
5. *Private Eye* magazine mocked the results of Sutton Trust research revealing that access to elite universities is dominated by private schools (Elliot Major 2016).
6. In the UK system, each HEI is required to submit to the government Office for Students a statement summarizing what activity and proportion of the fees they deploy to widen access. The Office for Students must approve this statement if the HEI is to be eligible to charge full fees.
7. Why such disparities continue to occur has been answered by Bourdieu, but the cultural arbitraries he referred to remain opaque. There has been a recent focus upon contextual offers (reducing entry requirements to capture potential not background) as a means to diversify elite university entrants. This paper offers insight into the subsequent internal workings of elite HEIs (what Reay, David, and Ball 2001 termed institutional habitus), given that an invitation to the party is no guarantee of enjoyment.
8. This a criticism leveled at the Sutton Trust — namely, its assumption that the same upward trajectory enjoyed by its founder via higher education is viable in a massified contemporary system.

9. An example of this would be when doctors are cooled into a career in dentistry (cf. Goffman 1953).
10. Collectively, this theoretical toolkit offers not a *deus ex machina*, but an analysis to join the present ubiquity of large-scale datasets and Bourdieusian analyses (cf. the Paired Peers n.d. project).
11. We are grateful to the first reviewer for their clarity on this point.
12. To such an extent that Goffman bit off the hand that fed him in terms of securing future research funding (Fine 1999).
13. The applicability of the term "elite" to all Russell Group universities is contested. The line taken here, after Thomas and Thomas (1928:572), is that if the student perceives it as elite it is elite in its consequences (as Skeggs' experience at York attests).
14. "Bodkin" is a pseudonym.
15. Sutton 13 refers to the work of the Sutton Trust, an educational charity seeking to improve social mobility, with particular reference to the university sector. Its founder achieved such mobility via fa grammar and Oxbridge education.
16. "The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivaled links with business and the public sector" (Russell Group 2019).
17. The core differences between colleges were size and age. The larger colleges had over a thousand students and the oldest were over a hundred years old. Newer colleges were established in the 1960s.
18. The UK General Certificate of Education Advanced Level. Grades (from high to low) are: A*, A, B, C, D, E, and U (unclassified). Some universities (and league tables) calculate these as points (A* = 56 and E = 16 points).
19. "Business offices, government agencies, spouses, and other kinds of operators are often careful to make a place for the mark [carrying their failed identities], so that dissolution of the bond will not be necessary. Here, perhaps, is the most important source of private charity in our society" (Goffman 1952:461).
20. For example, the translation table holds that when Britons say, "I'm sure it's my fault," they actually mean "it's your fault."
21. "Rahs" is a British informal term for upper-class students.
22. All fictional British Universities. The names have been changed from the three cited in the interests of anonymity.
23. Interviews for admission to university are not common in other HE systems. In the British model, it has declined as the system has expanded and is now largely confined to Oxbridge and some professional courses.
24. Misrecognition, by definition, remains misrecognized (see James 2015).
25. Independent schools are fee-paying, whereas comprehensive schools are state-funded.
26. Therefore, there must be Bodkin graduates who framed their university experience in entirely negative terms, but they were not identified by this study.

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