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The geographies of UK university halls of residence: examining students' embodiment of social capital

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Children's Geographies

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Abstract

Recent investigations into 'student geographies' have recognised the complex ways in which students from different backgrounds go about 'fitting in' among their peers within University managed accommodation. Halls have been characterised in the literature as highly pressurised spaces in which multiple (and potentially conflicting) identities can perpetuate disadvantage through incongruous accessibility to student-centric social activities and behaviours. This paper joins these debates by critical examining Universities' 'Student Accommodation' webpages alongside qualitative interviews in order to question notions of halls being inclusive and encouraging a cultural mix. Using Bourdieu's reading of social capital this paper suggests that, while these spaces may perpetuate disadvantaged access to social capital, some students may transcend this, drawing on other forms of non-student social capital which legitimises their position among their peers in halls. This adds to previous discussions of 'difference' by highlighting the power of social capital in transforming individuals' positions within social groupings.

Keywords

Halls of residence, students, social capital, student geographies, difference, higher education

Introduction

Recent debates surrounding the 'geographies of students' have extended the broader conceptualisations of student mobility (Holdsworth 2009b; Smith and Sage 2014; Smith, Rérat and Sage, 2014) studentification (Smith 2008; 2009) and the impacts of concentrations of students upon residential communities (Hubbard 2008) to acknowledge

the finer details of UK students' residential experiences. Such term-time 'housing biographies' (Rugg, Rhodes and Jones 2004) are quite particular to the UK higher education (HE) context with students characteristically following a pathway of living in University managed accommodation, typically situated on campus, and then moving out into shared privately rented housing in the wider community during subsequent years. These debates highlight the complexities surrounding the environments where students live and who they live among (Sage, Smith and Hubbard 2011; 2012; 2013; Munro and Livingston 2011; Smith and Hubbard 2014), and include discussions of how students from different backgrounds go about 'fitting in' among their peers (Holdsworth 2006; Crozier et al. 2009; Hopkins 2010). While this literature recognises the importance of these interactions in learning and social environments there remains a paucity of investigation into the initial period of living in halls of residence. This is telling as increased student numbers have put a great deal of stress upon the provision of University managed properties in recent years (Hubbard 2009) with 520,560 first year undergraduates enrolled at University in 2011/12, up from 493,005 in 2008/09¹ (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] 2014). This highlights inequalities in the provision of bed-spaces for first year undergraduates in institutionally maintained properties in the UK, with 316,580 bed-spaces available in 2011/12 and 309,765 in 2012/13 (HESA 2014).

This paper joins these debates through a consideration of the residential spaces provided by contemporary Universities (from here-on to be referred to as halls). Recent examinations have exposed the negative experiences of halls living (Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine 2012; Taulke-Johnson 2010; Fincher and Shaw 2009), focusing upon how students manage heterogeneity in what are primarily homogenous spaces. This investigation extends these discussions by highlighting the potential for difference to have

¹ Student numbers subsequently declined to 466,260 in 2012/13 (HESA, 2014), potentially due to the introduction of the higher rate of tuition fees.

positive outcomes in transitional residential spaces. To achieve this, this paper will employ Bourdieu's notion of social capital. Examining these processes through the lens of social capital is useful as it moves beyond investigations of [un]successful transitions through HE (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010), instead highlighting the ways in which students manage interactions with one another. Previous literature rarely discusses how these interactions are played out in the confines of halls, much less how heterogeneous students might manage their difference successfully in shared accommodation. This is surprising as halls is recognised as one of the primary sites for first year students to establish friendship networks (Christie, Munro and Rettig 2002). Hence, exploring these notions of difference within University managed accommodation through the lens of social capital will make a significant contribution to these literatures by recognising the dynamism (and creativity) of undergraduate students as they commence their journey through University. After reviewing the literature surrounding halls provisions and outlining the methods used to collect and analyse the data, the rest of this paper will be divided into two sections which will (1) critically unpack the assumption that halls of residences are inclusive spaces and (2) examine how those marked out as 'different' creatively utilise their social capital as collateral to 'fit in' among their peers.

Current provisions for halls of residence

Many studies of the 'geographies of students' suggest a very common 'home to halls to second year house' pattern which exists in the housing pathways of UK HE students (Hubbard 2009; Smith and Holt 2007; Holton and Riley 2013). This suggests a common expectation that Universities should provide their first year cohort with a room in University managed accommodation² (Universities UK 2014). However, in reality many Universities are incapable of making these provisions for all, seeking, where possible, external

² Some institutions, often elite or Russell Group Universities, are capable of offering places to subsequent year groups (although this is becoming uncommon as student numbers increase).

assistance from commercial providers to manage their first year accommodation (Smith and Hubbard 2014). According to HESA (2014) the number of students residing in private sector halls have increased from 90,915 (2011/12) to 102,255 (2012/13) suggesting accommodation has experienced similar neoliberalised effects as much of the rest of the HE sector (Chatterton 2010). In line with this, students' expectations over the quality of facilities within halls are exceeding the standard provision of being simply somewhere to sleep. En-suite facilities, high-speed internet access, catering, social and learning environments and security are incorporated into these expectations, meaning previous generations' impressions of 'scummy halls' (Smith and Holt 2007) are unlikely to be tolerated by contemporary students. This is reflected in the price with a self-catered en-suite room costing on average £122.81 per week in 2012/13, an increase of fifteen per cent on 2006/07 figures (National Union of Students [NUS] 2012).

Mindful of these accommodation expectations, Universities commonly build profiles of their halls of residences into their annual prospectuses, highlighting the benefit of residing in halls as part of a 'University experience'. Hence students (and to a certain extent parents) can be very keen to secure a place in halls prior to commencing University, particularly as being unsuccessful might appear to disadvantage them at this crucial time (Christie, Munro and Rettig 2002; Chow and Healey 2008). As Holdsworth (2006) argues, alternative living arrangements (for example, living at home, and to a lesser extent living in a privately rented student house) can often be written out of University prospectuses and other accommodation literature suggesting halls is perceived to be the most appropriate environment to house first year students. Hence, halls act as the appropriate location in which certain dispositions are learnt, assisting participants in understanding the rules associated with these spaces through the habitual experiences of them (Chatterton 1999). Likewise halls can be a crucial location in the initiation, development and maintenance of the student identity for first years (Smith and Holt 2007; Hubbard 2009). The intensity of

this environment means that members are perhaps more likely to gain access to similar types of cultural capital which they can in turn translate into the types of social capital required to greatly improve their chances of facilitating a smooth transition through the initial year of University. Such capital can take the form of popular student-centric social activities such as night-clubbing or through University promoted sport or leisure societies and the close proximity of halls to these spaces can be assumed to be conducive of the establishment of strong student identities.

Heterogeneous or homogenous environments?

There is an increasing body of literature which has begun to examine the heterogeneity within halls of residences, questioning how difference is managed by Universities and students alike. Historically halls were viewed as enriching environments (Silver 2004) designed to encourage inclusivity through interactions with culturally likeminded people (Morgan and McDowell 1979). In this sense they acted *in loco parentis*, harnessing academic reflection that was not clouded by domestic responsibilities (Holdsworth 2009b). These notions of homogeneity do not fit well alongside more contemporary readings of halls with many pointing to the "morphological configuration" (Amole 2009, 77) of halls in influencing students' satisfaction with their accommodation, the functionality of which can make them unappealing (Thomsen 2007). Fincher and Shaw (2009) go on to argue that the design and layout of halls reinforces marginalisation of certain students. In their Australian example, developers appeared to stereotype Asian international students greatly through the assumption that they were work focused and favoured high-rise living cultures – characteristics Fincher and Shaw's participants were keen to dispel. As Fincher and Shaw (2007) argue, these institutionalised spaces serve to manifest and replicate mono-cultural social networks among international students and greatly diminish the potential to forge meaningful connections both with, and outside of these spaces.

Halls may therefore be recognised as highly pressurised spaces when considering the multiple (and potentially conflicting) identities which reside in them (Taulke-Johnson 2010), the intensity of which is usually a combination of sustained interactions in close proximity. Importantly, these spaces can harbour more serious issues such as homophobia, racism and sexism which can often remain hidden within halls. For example, Taulke-Johnson (2010) suggests that discourses of heteronormativity can mark out shared halls as sexualised spaces where difference may be dealt with through anger or violence. Likewise, Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine (2012) stress that halls can be engineered towards ignoring difference in favour of supporting the desires of the masses, specifically promoting night-time drinking cultures. This can be particularly problematic in instances where boundaries between autonomy and *in loco parentis* become blurred (Sweeton and Davis 2003) resulting in confusion between students, parents and Universities over who is responsible for actions within the halls environment.

Social capital

This paper employs Bourdieu's (1986) reading of social capital to make sense of these student's living experiences. Importantly, the multiple/contrasting conceptualisations of social capital have received criticism, notably Putnam's (1993) interpretations. For example, Radcliffe (2004) argues that Putnam's seemingly over-optimistic theorisations of social capital being a resource which people either possess or fail to possess says very little about the relations of the types of people who interact with one another, particularly regarding the differences in power which exist between groups. Alternatively, Bourdieu's reading of social capital recognises the importance of social networks upon social well-being and the subsequent enhancement which can be achieved through collaborative action. Bourdieu (1986) discusses the formations and [re]distribution of social capital in relation to other forms of capital (cultural, economic and symbolic) and how actors respond actively, mobilising capital in order to maintain positions within certain fields (see Holt

2008; Fuchs 2003). Importantly, while Bourdieu's conceptualisations have been criticised for being static and not considering social mobility (Alexander 1995; Holt, 2008), Mohan et al. (2005) caution against disinvesting in social capital completely, arguing instead that it needs to be applied critically and with caution. Fuchs (2003) and DeFilippis (2001) argue that Bourdieu's opponents miss the transformative capability of capital and its ability to improve individuals' positions in social groups. However, Allen and Hollingworth (2013) caution that as a conceptual tool, social capital may be valuable in creating 'imagined capital' but without the right opportunities to realise that capital by transforming it into viable connections or economic capital its potential is useless. Hence, geographers, such as DeFilippis (2001) emphasise the importance of giving subjects the opportunities to recognise their capital while providing them the confidence to retain control over how their capital is distributed.

Useful to this paper is Holt's (2008) notion of 'embodied social capital'. Holt extends Bourdieu's conceptualisations by synthesising them with Butler's (1999) theorisations of performativity to create a more contemporary, and inherently geographical, theoretical model. Holt's (ibid) theory provides an insight into the "(re)production of inequalities and advantage through everyday sociability within a variety of social networks" (228). In doing so, Holt highlights the dynamic potential of embodied identities, suggesting that those who accept their position as 'different' can begin to incorporate some negative aspects of the dominant discourses associated with difference into their general 'sense of self' which, if perpetuated, subsequently influences their social position in other social situations (Holt 2010). Importantly, Holt's reading of social capital has two outcomes, first, that capitals are acquired through everyday performance rather than being generated in a vacuum. Second, that social capital may be transformative and may occur unconsciously, of the potential negativity and disadvantage associated with this. These readings of social capital are useful in considerations of the geographies of students in that access to social capital

may have some influence over the residential behaviours of students. Considering Holt's (2008) suggestions of inequitable access to capital challenges commonly associated understandings of halls being the settings most likely for the successful transference of seemingly 'legitimate' social capital among HE students. This may be due to the likelihood that students have entered these fields of activity specifically to take part in student-centric activities, both academic and social. What is significant here is the ways in which students acquire and operationalise their social capital may be an important component in understanding how students develop and manage their student identities as they make their transition through University.

Methodology

A mixed method approach, incorporating primary (interviews) and secondary (websites) data sources was applied here in order to provide a broad context of University managed accommodation. First, a content analysis was carried out on the 2014/15 'Student Accommodation' web pages for 119 UK Universities, with attention given to information on the provision and allocation of halls of residence. Utilising University websites as source material is useful as they are one of most common access points for prospective students looking for information on accommodation. In analysing this marketing material the language and phraseology were considered important to the analysis as such material is often framed in a particular way which will influence the reader. The webpages were open coded to generate themes and then thematically coded to reveal density of themes and to recognise any overlaps between how different institutions represented their halls of residences. This iterative process was useful as it meant the underlying messages within the material could be examined without losing its integrity (Charmaz 2006). From this analysis the primary theme to emerge was the halls of residence's capacity to provide a platform for making friends and meeting new people, within this other notions such as community, homeliness and independence were also prominent, as was the belief that

halls was the most appropriate and expected place to experience 'being' a student in first year.

This analysis was then enhanced with empirical interview data collected as part of a wider research project, conducted in the spring/summer of 2012 at the University of Portsmouth, concerned with how undergraduate students establish a sense of place in their term-time location. In all, thirty one 'walking interviews' were conducted in which the participants were accompanied on self-directed walks around the city, each lasting approximately an hour-and-a-half (see Holton and Riley (2014) for a detailed account of the walking interviews). Crucial to the quality of this data was that the relaxed nature of the interview style elicited lots of discussion of the students' living arrangements with the participants regularly steering the conversation to experiences of sharing accommodation and the both fractious and harmonious relationships they had with housemates. Of this cohort ten had resided in halls of residence during their first year of study. This comprised four male and six female students, who were primarily white (9), British (9) and under 21 years of age (8). These characteristics are fairly consistent with the literature's representation of the type of student typically expected to reside in halls (Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine 2012). Participants were selected through an earlier survey and willing candidates were sent an email invite outlining the details of the research. Some candidates inevitably dropped-out, often because the walking interviews required a little more involvement than and face-to-face encounter. Nevertheless, this technique drew together a strong and diverse sample of participants. The rich experiences of these participants provide a deeper level of context to the secondary data analysis, as well as problematising some of the common assumptions that are posed by Universities about how student accommodation enriches the University experience. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed using the computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) package Atlas-ti. The themes drawn from the secondary data concerning difference, agency and interdependence were explored within

the transcripts and related to the outcome of the secondary data analysis. What was significant about this analysis were the differences between the more 'traditional' students' experiences and those who might be deemed 'non-traditional'³. The following sections outline these differences in greater detail using first, the experiences of the 'traditional' students and second, three distinct examples of how differences were overcome by the participants.

The 'inclusivity' of halls

Analysing the University marketing material through the lens of social capital highlights how the halls environment may appear to support the operationalisation of the 'right' types of social capital through discourses of inclusivity, support and interaction, commonly assuming that halls is the right place within which to learn to become a student:

"We believe that living in University accommodation is the best way to make the most of your time with us" (University of Leicester).

"Life in halls of residence is a communal and enriching experience" (University of the Arts London).

"Accommodation plays a large part in student life and living in University accommodation adds a unique element to your student experience" (Swansea University).

Hence, as these passages suggest, living in halls optimises the potential for gaining a student experience and can be linked to multiple practices, such as making friends, socialising and studying (Christie, Munro and Rettig 2002). A period in halls therefore

³ Christie (2007) defines 'non-traditional' students as first generation University attendees from working class or minority backgrounds, whose limited knowledge of the inner workings of HE mean they can often experience much greater difficulties in 'fitting in' at University.

legitimises access to the 'student community', both in first year and subsequent years and supports assertions that halls can be a natural progression away from the family home environment (Hubbard 2009), being particularly relevant spaces in which to 'get on' and 'fit in' among other students.

Alongside this, the majority of University webpages emphasised the role of halls in being conducive to making new friends (often made instantly and with the potential to be lifelong) as well as being highly social environments where students can interact, study and have fun. This supports the discourses of halls of residences being the most appropriate environments for experiencing the multiple aspects of 'being a student' (Hubbard, 2009). This is particularly so for more traditional students, whereby living in halls may develop feelings of being 'in it together', facilitating greater opportunities for spontaneous interactions with instant and repeated access to social capital through the institutional setting:

"Living in University accommodation enables you to meet a diverse range of people from different backgrounds and cultures, on a variety of courses, and you can make friends straight away" (University of Exeter).

"The welcoming environment in our halls allows you to develop a sense of home and community. Each hosts a variety of social opportunities throughout the academic year from barbeques and movie nights to ice skating in Hyde Park and sports events" (Imperial College London).

However, these notions of inclusiveness become complicated when viewing them through the lens of social capital, particularly as the heterogeneous capital present among this diverse group may not necessarily be recognised or legitimised by the mainstream cohort. Hence, incorporating the interviewees' responses exposes some of the unease in joining in with some of the more typical student-centric behaviours associated with halls:

"I remember when I had my first night out in halls and it was just this massive group of people chanting about getting drunk and I was like "I've never done this before" and it seemed really alien. [...] If you're not seen drinking then you're not a valid member of the group" (Jenny)⁴.

Hence, while institutions suggest that interactions can be made *quickly*, in order to make this capital operational it must be recognised *instantly* during Freshers⁵ Week and sustained regularly through interactions with fellow flatmates. Those who fail to do this risk being ignored by the group or marked out as different. While Dovey (2005) argues that social capital is only valid for those included within a group, some students, by nature of their learned dispositions (and possibly their inertia) may inadvertently exclude themselves from future engagement with their student peer group by shirking the more typical social activities. This was alluded to by Tim and Lisa, second and third year students respectively, reflecting back on their experiences as first year's living in halls:

"I don't mean to sound harsh but if you don't make the effort in halls in the first few weeks then people think that you're the sort of person who wants to keep themselves to themselves, they assume that about you so there is that pressure to socialise in the first few weeks of Uni [sic]" (Tim).

"With all of the events, everyone is going to them and if you don't, you feel left out, so there is that socialising aspect but it's just the thing that you do. I mean if someone doesn't go clubbing you think "oh, they're a bit weird"" (Lisa).

As Bourdieu (1986) suggests, transfers of social capital can often be taken-for-granted and are achieved through mutual recognition of 'legitimate exchanges' – such as occasions, places or practices – which attempt to be as homogenous as possible in order

⁴ All names have been anonymised.

⁵ 'Fresher' or 'freshman' derives from the British or American term for a first year University student.

to bring their members closer together. What this implies for those living in halls is that better understandings of the likely conditions they may be investing their social capital in may ensure they understand, and can maximise the potential for accessing the opportunities available to them. As Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine (2012) point out, those with a greater knowledge of the workings of University operate as 'campus insiders', reinforcing discourses of position and privilege through their dominance and casting those who do not fit the uncivilised ideologies of the typical student - often associated with "hedonistic, pleasure-seeking, and sex/coupling [behaviours]" (Hubbard 2013, 267) as 'other'. These discourses appear to be supported, albeit implicitly, by the University webpages. While difference may be recognised, there is little indication as to how it may be incorporated into the mainstream social activities associated with halls. Both Tim's and Lisa's comments extend this, by suggesting that a failure to fit in during these first few weeks could have dramatic and lasting repercussions throughout their degree. This highlights the complex hierarchies and power dynamics which may exist in the halls environment which may stigmatise those who are different and prevent future mobilisations of social capital, even if they have legitimate access to it. Hence, while complex power dynamics are obviously not mentioned explicitly in the marketing material, the particular linkages between accommodation and the student experience which are [unwittingly] promoted by Universities spatialise the distribution of social capital and how this is recognised across University campuses. This may be most evident among those institutions that are unable to provide accommodation for all first year students. Hence, Universities may be forced to restrict places due to familial location or relationship status thus perpetuating and intensifying the exclusions of those students deemed 'different'.

Embodying difference

This section will provide a counterpoint to the previous discussions of halls promoting inclusivity (Silver 2004) and continuity (Christie, Munro and Rettig 2002) and/or

engendering forms of marginalisation (Taulke-Johnson 2010; Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine 2012). What are missing from these accounts are notions of how difference might provide some residents with opportunities to progress and mobilise alternative types of social capital within the halls environment to aid their progression through their first year. The following examples demonstrate instances where difference can be beneficial, providing individuals with status within their shared living spaces. The first example comes from Kay, whose formative years spent living in boarding school offered some insight into how prior knowledge can be used as a tradable commodity among flat-sharers:

"I think I've had a more gradual transition than a lot of people here because of being in [boarding school]. They did all the washing and things and in sixth form we had to do our own washing and then in halls we did our own cooking, I quite like that. I think if I'd had the very sudden transition that other people had, going from home to halls in first year, going from living with your parents and having to do everything. I'd find that quite a shock but having that gradual transition has been quite nice. [...] A lot of them [flatmates] got very homesick and they came and spoke to me about it because I was the only one that wasn't. It was strange, particularly in first year because some of the flatmates I had were immature to start with and they really didn't have a clue about how to look after themselves and I found I was a lot more comfortable more quickly with that whole aspect of that and I was helping people know what to do. [...] There was one person last year and I don't think she ever cooked anything that didn't need to be done in the microwave, she managed fine but I think she was more of your typical student than I was, she seemed to have a completely different attitude to living and things" (Kay).

What Kay's extract here indicates is how her own interpretations of what constitutes being a 'typical student', in this case one who is not necessarily domesticated, are constructed in relation to herself. Kay's previous experiences of living in boarding school have provided

her with a type of social capital which allows her to easily adapt to coping with the halls environment through increased domesticity and independence. Importantly, she recognises that her peers may have limitations in their domestic capabilities, offering advice in exchange for access to other social activities, meaning her knowledge may be a useful type of collateral to 'fit in' among her flatmates. This suggests that the heterogeneity present within halls, as highlighted in the literature (Christie, Munro and Rettig 2002; Hubbard 2009), can become complicated by previous institutional experiences. While Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine's (2012) interpretation of Massey's (2005) concept of 'throwntogetherness' might suggest homogenisation of student practices, Kay's responses reveals intricacies, suggesting students may create a kind of experiential hierarchy within their accommodation. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that not all members of a group have equal understanding of how to utilise the capital made available to them. There is no guarantee that investments in social capital will make a return as participants within a network (such as halls) may fail to recognise the value of mobilising their social relations, while the capital held within such networks may not necessarily be accessed equally by all participants. Kay's use of her pre-learned domestic knowledge as a tradable commodity goes some way in rectifying this by demonstrating how her authority among her household may engender a hierarchal structure within the halls environment in the development and mobilisation of capital. Her prior institutionalised knowledge gave her a head start over her peers in domestic practices and provided her with a degree of authority in how she imparted or traded her capital with flatmates.

Alongside support and interaction, many of the University websites highlighted the potential for halls to be inclusive environments which recognise and accept cultural and ethnic diversity as part of their marketing material:

“Living in a University residence gives you the perfect opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds” (Cardiff University).

“You’ll meet others from all over the world that share your interests” (Heriot-Watt University).

Hence, halls may be seen as the most suitable environment for cultural mix where the common leveller is education. Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine (2012) however, question this notion of a 'melting pot' stating that halls can expose difference through homogeneity and the active separation of different types of students. Likewise, Madriaga (2010) talks of students with mind and/or body differences actively self-segregating away from their peers as a tactic to buffer against not 'fitting in'. Nevertheless, it is important not to essentialise difference in this sense, particularly as some students may demonstrate tactics which allow them to integrate with their peers. Farah, an international student who lived in halls in year one, spoke of feeling isolated by her cultural differences. Whilst she did not experience victimisation by the people she shared with because of her difference (see Taulke-Johnson 2010), she discussed how being in an environment which did not reflect her culture, norms or values made it difficult to settle, resulting in Farah considering discontinuing her studies:

"In first year [...] my housemates were being a bit annoying and they didn't really get living around different people, they expected me to go out with them and party hard, things like that. I was homesick and missing home badly so I had to go to counselling to speak to someone and then I spoke to all of my flatmates together and we sorted this out" (Farah).

It took Farah until much later in the academic year to be able to have the confidence to acknowledge her cultural difference from her peers and actually do something about it:

"We'd all hang out together and then we'd all go our separate ways, you know, I'd want to go and get a drink, maybe a coffee somewhere quiet and they'd want to go and get wasted in Tiger Tiger. We all got on really well but we didn't hang out like

that. But after that we'd sit and bitch about everybody else, things like that, but we didn't really go out together because that would be horrible, I don't even want to think about it" (Farah).

Farah's acknowledgement of her cultural difference is manifested in her incompatible social capital. Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) argue that incompatible identities can have serious impacts over integration within halls, causing some students to "question their position within the University" (715). However, Farah's experiences extend this by suggesting that, in comparing her experiences from the beginning of the first year to the end, it is noticeable that she expresses her capital in different ways according to her knowledge, gradually legitimising her position among her peers. At first Farah felt trapped by the confines of halls, amplifying her difference and lack of desire to access the 'student-centric' behaviours promoted by the University. This manifested itself in homesickness and resulted in her having to seek support from the University. Farah's next account, while similar in that she still acknowledges her difference from the rest of her social sphere, demonstrates a form of agency in managing these social barriers. Holt's (2008) reading of embodied social capital may suggest that Farah has embodied her difference by building these separations into her sense of self. In this sense it is the reciprocity of these processes – Farah's own 'outsider' identity, contrasting with her peers' image of her not fitting in with their stereotypical norms of 'being a student', subsequently reinforcing these embodied identities. However rather than reproducing disadvantage through her embodied position as 'outsider' (Holt 2008), Farah was able to transform this capital into an advantage, mobilising her social capital in a way which allowed her to access the social spheres of her more typical flatmates but on her own terms.

In contrast to Farah's embodied experiences of being (and remaining) an outsider, Ruth, a 24 year old 'mature' student⁶ in her third year of study spoke of drawing on past, non-student social capital as leverage to forge meaningful connections with her fellow flatmates in halls:

"I was already a few years older than my fellow roomies [sic] but yeah, I mean I noticed that if you didn't go out in the first couple of weeks every night, people stopped asking you and then you were just by yourself. So I forced myself a few times to go out when I wasn't particularly in the mood and I found the biggest issue was, because I was older I'd already gone around with a cone on my head, I'd already discovered Jagerbombs, I was re-living their new alcohol experiences and I was like "I've done that"" (Ruth).

Ruth's comments here build upon Kay's earlier example by highlighting the ways in which non-traditional students might adopt characteristics in halls which complement the ideology of the 'typical student' (Holdsworth 2006; Hubbard 2013). Ruth expressed that while she was not necessarily keen on the idea of going out with her much younger flatmates, she recognised that investing in these types of social and cultural capital were crucial in ensuring a successful transition into the initial stages of 'becoming' a student. This suggests that social capital is not static but responsive meaning it can infuse burgeoning, and adaptive, student identities, becoming layered through experience. Importantly, access to spaces whereby these activities take place is fundamental to the development and transference of social capital for these young adults. Seemingly exclusive student-centric spaces, such as the Students' Union and Freshers' bars and clubs, which are heavily promoted in halls of residences (Chatterton 1999) carry associations with the development of institutionalised cultural capital – seen elsewhere in

⁶ In the UK mature students are defined as those who commence University over the age of 21.

other types of members' only clubs (see Holt 2008), whereby inclusion can provide access to the social capital required to 'get on' at University:

"We had a Polish guy living with us who was crazy, he was brilliant, he would take us down and show us Polish drinks and I would use my experience of "oh yeah, this is a Jagerbomb, put this in here and drink it", literally it was all about halls" (Ruth).

What Ruth's example demonstrates is the potential for non-traditional students to draw on other elements of their 'pre-student' identities in order to mobilise social capital. This is particularly important as Bourdieu (1986) suggests that social groups are capable of transforming or adapting contingent behaviours to maximise durable relationships between members, therefore Ruth's 'alcohol experiences' may have equipped her with enough social capital to make that initial step into the more typical student-centric social spheres. Crucially, Ruth's example demonstrates the capability of transcending the restrictions placed upon 'traditional/non-traditional' student binaries which invariably disadvantage the progress of non-traditional students through lack of knowledge and understanding of University life (Chatterton 1999). Focusing on the influence of social capital upon the development of these 'non-traditional' participants' identities highlights the potential for employing prior understandings of what these specific social fields might offer them in order to gain the 'right' experiences associated with their interpretation of being a student.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has sought to extend previous literatures concerned with how University students attempt to 'fit in' while at University (Holdsworth 2006; 2009a; Chow and Healey 2008). Research into the spaces of [higher] education are important in addressing the complex ways in which *where* students interact (the home, the lecture theatre, the student bar/club etc.) inform *how* and *why* they may have [un]successful

experiences of being at University. As Smith, Rérat and Sage (2014) have recently argued within the pages of this journal:

“[...] contemporary national and international spaces of education are prominent anchors, essential markers of social and cultural identity and training grounds for the future social and spatial mobilities in the lives and aspirations of many young people” (5).

Hence, recognising the geographies of education is useful in drawing various threads of students' experiences together to create a more holistic understanding of how students may interpret University. Moreover, this research has sought to interrogate one particular thread of University life through an investigation of how Freshers living in halls of residence manage their heterogeneity in what are primarily homogenous spaces. By examining Universities' student accommodation webpages, this paper has highlighted the implicit ways such marketing engenders the appropriation of certain spaces by students through socialisation and the expression of specific student-centric capital. Importantly, this analysis has demonstrated how Universities may unwittingly be privy to limiting access to student-centric social experiences through inadequate accommodation provision which place restrictions on students securing places due to familial location or relationship status. Hence, while institutions may market their University managed accommodation as inclusive environments, the qualitative responses suggest that such inclusivity may be challenged if residents do not immediately make an effort to 'fit in' among their new flatmates. However, it is important to recognise that, while the use of a case study has meant the intricacies of student accommodation can be investigated at depth, the diverse and complex geographies of UK halls of residences being situated in various environments (urban/rural) and localities (on/off campus) may also have implications for research into how students experience 'being' students.

Exploring these notions through the lens of social capital develops a richer understanding of how those who may be termed 'different' from the more traditional undergraduate cohort go about managing their trajectories through these complex spaces. As has been demonstrated (explicitly) in the primary and (implicitly) in the secondary analysis, the social capital, so desired by first year students, required to quickly and efficiently establish connections among other Freshers can often be off limits to non-traditional students through a lack of understanding of the workings of University life and the opportunities which may come from utilising it. Within the literature this often positions non-traditional first year students as non-legitimate or 'other' (Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine 2012; Taulke-Johnston 2010) and may influence the quality of their trajectories through the rest of their degree (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld 2005). While the analysis of the University websites may back up these claims (and to a certain extent legitimises them) further analysis extends this by demonstrating how some students are capable of transcending their position as 'other' by utilising different forms of capital to act as leverage among their peers. The three examples used here highlight how drawing upon previous social and/or cultural experiences may provide enough capital with which to legitimise their position within their halls environment.

Importantly, these empirical findings extend recent applications of social capital which have demonstrated its value in relation to the social positioning of [dis]ability (Holt 2010; Worth 2012) and ageing (Antoninetti and Garrett 2012) and how identities are perceived both by self and by other. This paper has revealed how examining young people's behaviours through the lens of social capital may be advantageous to future research on the geographies of children and HE as it broadens our understanding of how young people maintain (or fail to maintain) positions within their social groups. As Holt (2008) argues, investigating the accumulation and transference of social capital problematises notions that young people automatically 'fit in' among their peers by highlighting the ways in which

difference and disadvantage can become embodied by those who may struggle to mix with their peers. However, what this research has demonstrated is that difference may not necessarily signify disadvantage, with some young people drawing on seemingly incongruous social capital which enables them opportunities to access different social groups. As Kay's and Ruth's examples demonstrated, while they can be identified as non-traditional students (Ruth is a mature student while Kay is a first-generation attendee), they refused to allow their difference to hold them back, instead drawing on their non-student backgrounds to find ways of 'fitting in' among their peers. Hence, while this may not be typical of all students' experiences it is important to be aware of the power of different, and sometimes seemingly incongruous, social capital in transforming the social position of those less powerful in society. Moreover, these discussions of the heterogeneity of youth contributes to discussions of social capital by problematising Bourdieu's (1986) notions that the transference of social capital is essential for reproducing homogeneity within social groups. While heterogeneity may appear to weaken the power of capital exchanges within groups, its utilisation here demonstrates an ability for young people to recognise their individuality by drawing on a variety of forms of capital to gain status within social groupings.

While this analysis has been useful in providing an insight into the diversity of University managed accommodation, these types of issues may inevitably arise in other forms of student accommodation, such as privately rented shared housing. Further investigations into student house-sharers may highlight the implications of operationalising social capital in what are more interdependent households. This may hold particular resonance for examining difference at different scales, especially for those first year students who were unable to secure places in halls, and may highlight different social and spatial issues from living in what are assumed to be second and third year spaces. Likewise, this type of research may also have implications for understanding the dynamics of other forms of

institutional living, such as hostels, care homes or boarding schools, where groups of heterogeneous people are placed together for periods of time.

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