Chapter Three

Becoming a higher education student: Managing expectations and adapting to independent learning

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Abstract

This chapter traces the BAME students' adaptation to university learning and experience of studying for a degree. Survey and interview data capture the pressures many students feel to 'make good' on their parents' sacrifices and investment in education by achieving a first-class degree result. However, these expectations come into conflict with the transition from college to university as universities expect students to adapt as proactive independent learners while tacitly and unreflexively reproducing social norms of whiteness. Resultant feelings of racial and class unbelonging self-protection sees independent learning effectively repurposed as self-reliance for BAME students. Though some are able to accumulate and deploy forms of black cultural capital to claim racial agency within a predominantly white learning environment, others seek to build forms of bonding capital through the establishing of peer networks. These can help students collectively accrue knowledge while managing the pressures to achieve academically.

Keywords: Higher education; race and ethnicity; social capital; academic capital; independent learning; microaffirmations; networking; belongingness; black cultural capital

Introduction

The previous chapter indicated that students of colour do not typically lack capital resources that facilitate entry into higher education, as the combination of parental support and widening participation drives has seen consistently high BAME representation at university (Modood, 2004). However, representation is no guarantee of academic success, and while many students favour studying at HEIs which provide ethnic mix, it is worth highlighting that the white-BAME attainment gap has been reproduced across 92 per cent of UK universities (UUK/NUS, 2019: 13). In other words, the gap is not reducible to individual choice or the composition of a university's student demographic – it is at least partly shaped by institutional factors (Singh and Cowden, 2016; Richardson, 2013). This, of course, incorporates a myriad of factors which will be explored across the chapters of this book, including extracurricular campus culture (chapter four), staff-student interactions (chapter eight), and curriculum inclusivity (chapter ten). Having established their motivations for higher education, this chapter will look at how BAME students encounter the institutional and learning culture of HE. This involves assessing not only students' preparedness for

university, but also university's preparedness to support and accommodate the needs and expectations of BAME students.

Literature responses to this question have drawn extensively on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1986), but there is a need to adapt his toolkit of habitus, capital, and field to take account of transformations in the university system over the past three decades. Recent and ongoing processes of massification and professionalisation have helped standardise many aspects of the university experience. With the exception of Oxbridge and some smaller, specialised HEIs, these processes have arguably diluted the significance of cultural traditions and expectations of student conformity. This does not mean that modern 'professionalised' universities have forgone their institutional habitus, however. Thomas (2002: 431) defines this as 'relational issues and priorities which are deeply embedded, and subconsciously informing practice', and drawing on Bernstein's (1996) theory of 'invisible pedagogies', Crozier and Reay (2011) argue that student adaptation still entails the absorption of recognition and realisation rules. The former relates to the purpose and function of legitimate activities (e.g. a lecture), whereas the latter pertains to their public performance (i.e. knowing how to perform effectively during a lecture). It is important to foreground race within the concept of institutional habitus. Studies by Read et al (2003) and Jessop and Williams (2009), for example, find that even 'post-1992' universities with an ethnically diverse undergraduate cohort uphold a habitus that privileges whiteness. This involved the minimisation of race in favour of a 'colourblind' approach to learning, leaving BAME students feeling 'othered'.

Definitions of institutional habitus must also incorporate the idealised learning styles and strategies that universities promote – either explicitly or implicitly – to their students. This is arguably best captured by the concept of the 'independent learner', which has become increasingly ubiquitous within UK higher education. With universities typically operating under a modular system, often catering for large undergraduate cohorts, it is likely that no student's timetable will look the same. This creates greater curricular choice than in school or college, with students required to select optional, specialist modules in addition to their core programme. Moreover, timetabled teaching usually comprises 20-40 per cent of a programme's expected study time, necessitating that students organise their own independent study around these events (Green, 2014). Consequently, universities promote 'independent learning' to emphasise students' requirement to be more intrinsically motivated and critically reflexive in how they develop their study routines.

One can argue that the need for students to develop as independent learners within such a system is unavoidable. Independent learning may help promote and develop valuable and transferrable skills – such as time management and organisation – but its practical definition and application at university is arguably more ambiguous. Students are also expected to identify and proactively seek out available support services where necessary, albeit without recourse to staff setting the terms of their study for them. For this reason, the independent learner discourse has been criticised by Leathwood (2006) for not only shifting the pedagogical consequences of massification onto the students themselves, but also upholding an ethnocentric masculinist ideal of a student 'unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty, or self-doubt' (Leathwood, 2006: 615; see also Read et al, 2003: 272).

This necessitates a closer investigation of the capitals that students possess and deploy to succeed academically at university. Previous studies have placed great emphasis on Bourdieu's (1986)

concept of embodied cultural capital as it encompasses the knowledges and styles of behaviour that are rewarded within a given field. Applied to university, deployment can demonstrate confidence and belonging within the campus field, combining 'the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition' (Bourdieu, 1986: 245). There is also value in following Watson's (2013: 416-7) lead by adapting Bourdieu's term *academic* capital to capture the 'legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge profitable to students within the field which ultimately [translate] into academic attainment'. Recalling the aforementioned 'invisible pedagogies' of higher education, this includes styles of oral presentation and written work, as well as rules and conventions such as degree classifications and referencing systems.

As noted in the previous chapter, it is important to avoid presupposing a deficit model of capital accumulation when applying Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Choosing to 'play the game' is not necessarily a viable or efficacious option for students of colour, nor does it afford them agency within a system where the 'legitimated forms of academic knowledge' have historically presupposed whiteness. To counter this, authors advocating a critical race perspective such as Carter (2003), Rollock et al. (2015), Wallace (2017), and Meghji (2019) have proposed the term *black* cultural capital as a means of identifying the knowledge, taste, and styles which assert the legitimacy of people of colour within historically white fields. Though recent drives to 'decolonise' university curricula indicate that black cultural capital should be endorsed by teaching staff (at least in theory), its deployment also has the potential to cut through the institutional 'performance' of equality and diversity (Mirza, 2018) by asserting the power of black knowledge and experience from below.

Nevertheless, possession of any form of capital represents a position of relative class privilege, and so it is important to consider the source of transmission. As noted in chapter two, studies of social capital as a resource for UK higher education have tended to focus on how family networks may help broker access for the middle-classes to the most prestigious universities (e.g. Reay et al, 2005; Ball; 2003; Devine, 2004). Authors such as Modood (2004), however, preferred to emphasise the bonding capital that helps instil high expectations of and levels of commitment to university participation. Fuller (2011: 82) further claims that this sort of social capital can 'flow down the generations', to the extent that educational achievement becomes an essential part of a family's shared identity. This was found to be true for our BAME interviewees from the previous chapter, with higher education viewed as a vehicle for social mobility. For first-generation migrants, this tended to be articulated in terms of converting existing educational capital from overseas into a new country, whereas for UK-born and raised students university represented a means of staying competitive in an often-discriminatory labour market (see chapter two).

Of course, the persistence of the white-BAME attainment gap indicates either a relative lack of, or misalignment between, capitals the majority of students of colour are able to deploy, and the expectations and assumptions embedded within a university's institutional habitus. This is the core focus for this chapter. Research data is again drawn from our study of University of Kent students studying in the 2014-5 academic year – specifically, a survey of home-domiciled undergraduates[1] (N=4504) and 62 follow-up interviews – with student narratives picking up where the previous chapter left off. It comprises of two substantive sections. The first captures students' adaptation to learning in higher education. This focuses initially on their own expectations of their academic attainment, before moving onto their development as independent learners. In both discussions significance is afforded to the role of parental expectations, as well as the struggles experienced in

encountering a more impersonal academic environment. The second section explores BAME students' strategies for accruing and deploying capital on campus, be it through asserting their ethnic identity within the curriculum, or by developing peer networks that help foster a sense of relatedness on campus.

Adapting to higher education learning: Expectations of success, scale-shift, and becoming independent learners

The previous chapter identified recurrent themes within BAME student decision-making, notably the high value placed on university from parents, experiences of racial unbelonging in prior schooling, and how intersections with class that may facilitate or further constrain the options available. While it is certainly clear is that BAME students typically do not lack motivation to achieve at university, we may question how these factors impact on their learning strategies and practices. Survey data presented in table 1 shows that a higher proportion of black and Asian students state that they are aiming for a first-class degree result, and are confident of achieving this grade, than their white counterparts.

Table 1: Student expectations of gaining a first-class degree result by race

	Aiming for a 1st class degree	% confident they will achieve it	% of ethnic group is aiming for a 1st and confident of achieving it
White (N=2836)	51.9%*	70.6%*	38.3%*
BAME (N=932)	58.3%*	74.5%*	45.1%*
Black students (N=424)	60.4%	76.9%	46.9%
Asian students (N=295)	58.2%	75.2%	43.1%

N=4504. *P=0.00.

Table 2: Comparing concerns about family expectations with aiming for a 1st class degree result

		Had concerns about academic achievement not meeting family expectations		
		Agree	Disagree	Not applicable
Aiming for a 1st and confident of achieving it	White (N=1033)	38.8% 401	55.6% 574	5.6% 58
	BAME (N=393)	51.3% 206	45.2% 176	3.5% 11

N=1426. P=0.02.

These expectations clearly run counter to the white-BAME attainment gap, though we should be careful when interpreting student confidence within this context. Table 2 considers the role of family expectations among white and BAME students who claimed to be aiming for a First and were confident of achieving it. The data indicates that more than half of BAME students are also concerned about their academic achievement not meeting the expectations of their family, compared with 38.8 per cent of white students. This suggests that 'confidence' betrays an underlying pressure to make good on their parents' sacrifices through high academic achievement.

The underlying assumption is that you are in a privileged position and cannot waste this opportunity: there is no room for failure. Recalling family narratives discussed in the previous chapter, as well as Stuart et al's (2011) study, this can be bound up in family migrant narratives where students' attainment is one such measure of capital conversion from one country to another. For Frances, who was born in Germany to Nigerian parents, this association was made explicit in a recent conversation with her father:

> My dad sat me down and was like, "Even if you fail this degree, I know you've gotten further than I've gotten ever and I'm so proud of you for that. But that doesn't mean you can fail this degree" [*laughs*]. […] My parents have been through a lot and worked very hard, so I want to make them proud and I know the only way to make them proud is to go further than they did and be a professional. My mum was always like, "I could have been a doctor. I could have been a nurse. I didn't have the opportunity to go to uni and just study." So I always say I want to take it further than she did, and I want my kids to go further than I could. (Frances[2], BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

For Gina, who was born and schooled in the UK, her goal of achieving a First-class degree was not directly shaped by a family migration narrative, reflecting instead the internalisation of her parents' emphasis on upward social mobility. Nevertheless, as the first in her family to attend university she contrasted her background unfavourably to those of her white peers. Again, the intersection of race and class plays a part, as she believed middle-class white students are less likely to feel the same pressures to outperform their parents academically:

> I do want to get a First, I have very high expectations of myself. My parents would never put any pressure on me – 'do as best as you can', type of thing – but I want to get a First. I think I might put too much pressure on myself, I'm not very good under pressure. […] When you're a minority, I think all my friends are the first people to go to uni, so it's just like you want more from life. I'm not saying all white people's parents have gone to uni but it's more so, like, black people's parents *haven't* gone to uni. It's just you can see when you're from something lower and you see something higher, that's what you aim for. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology – Black Caribbean)

Of course, not all BAME students lack relevant social capital[3], and for students like Darren whose parents have already been to university, the expectation is one of *maintaining* high educational standards within the family:

> My mum went to university. She's even made a space on the wall for the [graduation] picture, next to hers. Pressure, yes, but it's what I wanted to do, so… (Darren, BA Business Studies – Black Caribbean)

As a black Caribbean student born in the UK, Darren's familial pressure is reminiscent of James's from the previous chapter. Since the sector's expansion and introduction of widening participation policies in the 1990s, higher education has become one of the most widely accessible (albeit expensive) means of converting employability potential into transferrable currency. This enables people of colour to feel more competitive in what is potentially a racially discriminatory labour market. Nevertheless, the increased supply of university graduates has intensified pressures to achieve a 'good' degree. Charlotte (who was the first in her family to attend university) and Chloe

(whose parents went to university overseas) both spoke of the pressure to achieve a First or 2:1, considering any lower grade to be a marker of failure:

> Realistically I'm aiming for a First, I'm not going to lie. I'm working hard for a First, I really want a First, it would be great to get a First, but nothing lower than a 2:1. I will cry if I get a 2:2. (Chloe, LLB Law & Business Studies – Black African)

> I definitely want to get a First, or at least a 2:1 because in order for me to progress to the Master's [degree] I can't have a 2:2. A First will enable you to think "okay definitely I can handle this". But if you got like a 2:2, or just a pass, then it's just like, maybe education's not for me. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology – Black African)

Such pressures can at least help engender a clear sense of purpose at university, with familial expectations and employment ambitions providing extrinsic motivation to achieve students' stated goals. However, these pressures may not necessarily complement the development of academic strategies and behaviours that are most likely to be rewarded in university. Table 3 cross-tabulates students' worries and concerns when first starting at university with race and household income. Low-income BAME students are the group with the highest percentage of agreement for each question apart from 'academic preparedness' which is a concern felt consistently across all groups (albeit slightly less for high-income white students). Intersections between race and household income are also evident in students' concerns over meeting family expectations, though percentages are consistently higher for each BAME income group compared with white students. Concerns about 'feeling different to other students' are more evenly distributed across all groups, indicating that 'unbelonging' can be prompted by factors other than class and race. Again, however, these are most keenly felt by low-income BAME at 67.1 per cent of all students in this category.

Table 3: Student worries and concerns by race and household income

		It is common that students have worries and concerns when first starting at university. How much do the following statements capture some of your concerns when you first came to the University of Kent?				
		% agree 'I had concerns about not being prepared enough academically'	% agree 'I had concerns about getting myself organised to attend lectures and relevant events'	% agree 'I had concerns about coming to a new city'	% agree 'I had concerns about feeling different to the other students'	% agree 'I had concerns about my academic achievement not meeting my family's expectations'
White	High income (n=402)	65.7%*	51.5%	47.4%	51.0%ᵗ	41.8%
	Middle income (n=420)	70.7%*	49.6%	43.7%	57.5%ᵗ	43.0%
	Low income (n=787)	75.9%*	54.0%	46.6%	59.0%ᵗ	43.0%
BAME	High income (n=96)	72.6%	58.3%	50.0%	52.1%	52.2%
	Middle income (n=124)	67.7%	57.0%	50.4%	49.2%	57.6%

	Low income (n=383)	74.7%	64.8%	57.8%	67.1%	58.8%

N=4504. *P=0.00; ⁺P=0.03.

Of course, unbelonging is not limited to the classroom, and this theme will be explored in more detail in chapter four. With regard to students' learning strategies, table 3 indicates that BAME students are more concerned about 'getting organised to attend lectures' than white students. Again, this is highest for low-income BAME students with 64.8 per cent agreeing with this statement. This speaks to fundamental differences in the learning culture of higher education compared to further education, with the former placing greater emphasis on self-responsibility within a more individualised learning environment. For Eric, Frances, and Dawn, the loss of supervised, collective learning routines that characterised their experiences of school and college was highlighted as a key challenge upon entering university:

> University is a lot more free, there's a lot more room to do whatever you want to do. And without that academic rigorous structure enforced by parents, you're leaving an environment you've known and going into a completely different one. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature – Mixed Race)

> It's like going from really personal to very impersonal. One of my A-Level teachers was like, "The first thing that shocked me at uni is that no one knows where I am right now". That's how I feel. It's a really, really individual experience. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

> I think the difference is the culture. We don't have parents here. Parents at home would be, "Do your work, do your work, come home early, go to bed early," while here we are in a playground, we do whatever we want to do. If we don't want to go to our seminar we won't go to our seminar. (Dawn, LLB Law, Black African)

It is interesting that Eric and Dawn's comments emphasise the loss of parental influence within this context. This arguably underlines their longstanding role as extrinsic motivators. Once removed from the family home, however, students are conscious of the need to establish themselves as self-directed independent learners. The growing ubiquity of this concept dates back to the expansion of HE in the 1990s, with numerous studies finding that WP students especially struggled to adapt to university learning models (Lowe, and Cook, 2003; Cook and Leckey, 1999). Over time schools and colleges began to address this directly via preparatory events and programmes (Money et al, 2020), with many universities providing guides and resources on their websites.[4] However, student awareness of basic independent learner principles such as time management is not the same as being able to perform effectively as an independent learner. This points to ambiguities between how independent learning is defined explicitly by HEIs and how it is constructed implicitly through an institution's learning culture. For students such as Gina, independent learning is positioned as the binary opposite of any support service that may constitute 'spoon-feeding'. This is informed by her experience of schooling, which she invokes as explaining her initial struggles to adapt to higher education:

> Independent learning's the main thing for uni. In secondary school we had booster sessions and extra classes afterwards. A lot of teachers in my school would spoon-feed: do

> this, do that. It's all about the grades, it's not really about the students. Maybe spoon-feeding too much at school kind of backfired when you get to uni. Unless you've got really hard parents that push you, you're not going to push yourself if you don't know how. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology – Black Caribbean)

It is also telling that Gina refers to the role of parents within this context: although a core tenet of university practice is the minimisation of institutional dialogue with parents or guardians, they remain influential in students' university lives. While some might offer specific capital resource (see next section), they also represent a source of pressure to succeed academically. This presents particular difficulties for students who are the first in their family to study in higher education: for Charlotte, her struggles to adapt as an independent learner were compounded by her family's relative lack of knowledge or understanding of university study life:

> My parents are there to ensure that I'm doing it 'cause if they get a bad report they will be the first one to come down and [say] "Why are you getting a bad report?" […] Like I'm stressing about my essay and [my mum] wants me to do something at that moment I'm busy. She's like, "Why are you complaining? You just have to go to lectures!" And I'm like, "No it's not, you don't understand how stressful it is, reading and trying to do an essay, and trying to like live on your own. She thinks it's a walk in the park. I can't even be on my phone without her going, "Why are you on your phone? Shouldn't you be reading?" (Charlotte, BSc Psychology – Black African)

Negotiating family pressures may also skew students' perception of how they must adapt as independent learners. Yee's (2016) study finds that for students without a family history of university attendance, 'independent learning' was interpreted as more akin to self-reliance. This reflected students' pride in their abilities and achievements to date in spite of their relative lack of privilege, but it also betrayed a desire for self-protection within an environment in which they lacked belongingness. This is arguably evident in how Gina and Charlotte's characterise independent learning:

> Independent learning, it's a difficult thing to grasp in itself. I mean, there's people you can ask to help but we don't, and they won't give us the answers. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology – Black Caribbean)

> I feel like because of the independence we have it's not necessary [to seek help or advice]. Even when I get my essay feedback, and sometimes it's like, okay let me speak to someone about it, but then I'm just like, nah I'm not bothered *[laughs]*, the paper says it all. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology – Black African)

In both cases, it is significant that independent learning entailed the avoidance of personalised interactions with academic teaching staff. As per Yee's (2016) analysis, this might reflect students' perceived lack of entitlement to teacher support, a fear of rejection, or a compulsion to prove they were capable of working things out without the need for assistance (see also Stuart et al, 2011). For Frances, Chloe, and Eric, asking for help ran the risk of looking 'dumb' in front of teachers, undermining their need to feel competent as a student:

> Sometimes you just feel dumb. Like, I should really know this and if I ask the question they're just going to be like, 'why does she not know this?' *[laughs]* That holds me back from asking all the questions. […] Putting your hand up in front of 220 people and then risking sounding like a dummy isn't necessarily something that I want. I find it's easier to just message my friends than email a lecturer. Some lecturers don't reply, others are like, "This is stuff that you really need to be able to do by yourself." (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

> As a student you get this feeling that, oh gosh, you don't want to go and see your teacher, you don't want to seem like you don't know anything. (Chloe, LLB Law & Business Studies – Black African)

> What if someone finds out that I'm not doing very well? I just think it's really hard once you've been told before you go to university, "Oh, this is the start of the rest of your life. This is your chance to prove yourself." If you're not having that best time for multiple reasons, it can be really difficult to actually admit to struggling academically. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature – Mixed Race)

Though self-reliance might be considered an asset in some learning contexts, at university it is labour-intensive, emotionally draining, and arguably counter-productive if employed at the expense of accessing dedicated contact hours and support services. This, of course, likely contradicts how most learning and teaching specialists present independent learning to students, but it is important to interrogate how this misconception has become so commonplace. First, we can point to the relative lack of preparation students receive for university learning and teaching at further education. Money et al's (2020) study indicates that while sixth-form colleges attempt to lay the foundations for developing university-ready independent learners, this is compromised by institutional pressures to prioritise activities that will maximise immediate outcomes – activities, of course, which are largely teacher-directed. This may leave students with an impression of independent learning that is open to misinterpretation.

Second, recalling Leathwood's (2001; 2006) aforementioned critique, the independent learner discourse arguably presupposes students' prior capital resourcing, as well as relatedness on campus that facilitates proactive behaviour. As we have seen throughout this chapter, many BAME students feel pressure to convert their parents' sacrifices and expectations into high grades, and this pressure is exacerbated by encountering a new field that is largely governed by invisible pedagogies and implicitly upholds a white institutional habitus. The resultant instinct to avoid 'sticking out' – which for some students may echo prior experiences of schooling in the UK – comes into conflict with an expected mode of learning that emphasises student autonomy and proactiveness, especially with academic staff. Within this context, it is hardly surprising that students of colour may particularly venerate self-reliance.

Combatting this tendency arguably places greater responsibility on academic and support staff to be proactive in their support for BAME students. As discussed in more detail in chapter eight, there are structural constraints which inhibit the development of meaningful teacher-student relationships in most universities, yet as Leathwood points out independent learning can easily function as a discourse for justifying the minimisation of such interactions. Of course, large cohort sizes divided across a modular system typically affords fewer opportunities to develop more personalised and

enduring relationships at university compared with college. Nevertheless, these constraints risk reinforcing the perception – implicitly or explicitly reproduced by staff – that the most competent students will always work out the answers themselves. Consequently, it can take time for students to become sufficiently confident within the university field to overcome this perception and make use of the support systems available to them:

> I just thought uni is where you go to learn, and if you're struggling then you're probably not meant for uni. I only found out [otherwise] by talking to my academic adviser when I was struggling, and he pointed me in the right direction. When you're not looking for something, you don't really see it. (Joseph, BEng Computer Systems Engineering – Black African)

One should not underestimate the continued underrepresentation of staff of colour – particularly in certain subject areas – at UK universities as a contributing factor in BAME students' willingness to seek out academic support. Drives towards cultural sensitivity and implicit bias training may help limit – if not exactly eradicate – racialised microaggressions delivered by academic staff, but it is important to note that the attainment gap is a product of white advantage as well as BAME disadvantage. This brings us to microaffirmations. McIntosh (1989) notes that white advantage is derived from spending most of the time in company of white people and seeing white representation in all aspects of organisation. Consequently, they are never being asked to speak on behalf of their own race or be judged or defined by it. McIntosh characterises these benefits and privileges as an 'invisible knapsack', which equips white people to feel comfortable and competent in a variety of social environments. Microaffirmations are thus a fundamental mechanism for producing unconscious white privilege. These are manifested through small, yet regular gestures of inclusion, which create and maintain a sense of legitimacy and belonging for the recipient.

As a concept, the invisible knapsack is analogous to Bourdieu's habitus, yet one that foregrounds racial experience. In higher education, these interactions may involve recognising and validating a student's background, academic interests, expectations of success, and their personal motivations and ambitions. This can instil a sense of belonging which negates initial feelings of anxiety or 'imposter syndrome' that incoming students may often feel. Though the transference of microaffirmations is difficult to pinpoint, they are arguably evident in certain white students' personal narratives of adapting to university:

> My seminar leader, he'd take you through the essay personally to give you things to work on. Every time I had one of those sessions I did better in the next essay. He offers it with everyone, hardly anyone takes it, which is a bit stupid. You could chat to him like you could chat to any bloke in the pub. You've got to take these sorts of opportunities. (Frankie, English Language & Literature – White)

Though a first-year undergraduate, Frankie's comment arguably reflects a basic, yet meaningful, cultural commonality and recognition with his tutor. Consequently, one-to-one feedback sessions were an available resource he felt entitled to quickly use to his advantage. We can contrast this with the experiences of Frances. As a student studying in a department with an especially low representation of BAME staff, her interactions (or lack of) are characterised by the comparative *absence* of microaffirmations. Consequently, Frances found it more difficult to build a meaningful rapport with lecturers, an issue that she felt marked her out as different to her white peers:

> It's more easy for white people to approach lecturers, because they can relate to them more. I don't feel like I *can't* approach the lecturers because I don't relate to them, it's more for me of a… there's no personal connection. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

To sum up, it is important to situate the significance of microaffirmations and microaggressions within the context of students' expectations of university achievement, and the learning culture of higher education. Interactions with staff – be it through spontaneous conversations following a lecture, or an arranged meeting with a tutor – are indicators of belonging within a field that unwittingly reproduces white privilege not only through BAME staff underrepresentation, but via the promotion of a learning strategy that rewards individual confidence and proactivity. This can further compound pressures students already feel to convert their efforts into career-enhancing outcomes. That the resultant fear of failure stimulates a need for self-protection within this environment should therefore come as little surprise. Though HEI practitioners may reasonably view independent learning as an essential component of the broader value of a university degree, results in this section nevertheless indicate HEIs need to do more to understand students' backgrounds and learning needs, and reconsider how inclusivity should be practiced.

Building social and academic capital on campus: Family, networks, and race

Despite the pressures of adapting to higher education learning, it is important not to deny BAME students' agency within this field. Race may be a significant barrier for belonging in any white-dominated field, but interview accounts show that students of colour typically seek to accrue and deploy their own capital within the university. Nor is their deployment simply a matter of learning to play the game: black cultural capital, for example, can help challenge implicit whiteness within course curricula as well as foster personal attainment. This final section will discuss three forms of capital used by BAME students at university: first, social capital as inherited from family; second, the deployment of black knowledge and experience in course curricula; and third, students' investment in bonding social capital through the development of friendship networks on campus.

Bourdieu's (1986: 21) emphasis on the value of 'network(s) of connections' leaves plenty of room to interpret how social capital might be converted into success in higher education. Arguably the most manifest expression is found in studies of 'old boys' or 'old school tie' networks where access to exclusive fields and positions is brokered through prior association with well-connected individuals. The professionalisation and massification of higher education has arguably made this sort of social capital more subtle in its power and significance, exemplified in Reay et al's (2005: 72-3) account of how middle-class parents used their network connections to help select the 'best fit' Oxbridge college for their children. For most ordinary students, however, social capital inherited from parents involves the transmission of familial norms and aspirations which are valued not only for their conversion into the habits and practices that produce academic attainment but also for instilling a sense of family membership and identity (Modood, 2004; Coleman, 1990; Bankston and Zhou, 2002; Adewumi, 2015). In Chloe's case, for example, family social capital allows her to be *understood*, which is a recognition and validation of her legitimacy as a student. This serves as a counterweight to the pressure she feels to achieve academically:

> My mum, she's kind of getting the hang of me telling her, "I have so much work to do, I can't really talk now," sort of thing. But my dad is a barrister, so he's already prepared his mind: she's going to be doing a lot of work. (Chloe, LLB Law – Black African)

The previous chapter highlighted that many BAME students born outside the UK possessed this sort of social capital, but that it often drew from a wider overseas family network. Bourdieu was keen to debunk any inference that the value of social capital was reducible to physical proximity of network connections, and this is evident in how Joseph and Meera both sought advice remotely from family members and connections when preparing for university:

> My uncle went to boarding school as well as university [in Nigeria]. So I can ask him for information and all that when it comes to education-wise. (Joseph, BEng Computer Systems Engineering – Black African)

> I have a close family friend was at the university [in Kenya], so I called her and asked her questions about uni. (Meera, BA Comparative Literature – Other Asian Background)

In terms of the content of these interactions, students spoke of the value of these conversations in fairly generic terms with conversations covering themes of time-management and making friends. Though undoubtedly valuable both for helping students prepare as independent learners and strengthen their sense of entitlement within higher education, not all advice was necessarily well-received. A longstanding critique of Bourdieu's theory is that it presupposes a common national context (Ball et al, 2003), and combined with transformations in the structure of higher education over the past three decades, this can create disconnect between presumed social capital relations:

> My dad went to university when he was in Egypt […] He was like, "You only have eight contact hours a week or something. We studied from like 7am until we finished, there was no specific time to go home," so he thinks we have it really easy. (Yeni, BA Politics & International Relations – Other Mixed Background)

As noted in the previous chapter, Yeni's academic family background has created 'durable ambitions' – she also recalls her father telling her throughout childhood that she should become a doctor – but as the first in her family to study in the UK this social capital is only partially transferrable in practice. This highlights some of the opacities of capturing the power and influence social capital, for as Nast and Blokland (2014) argue, networks may exist in measurable form but not necessarily produce valuable communication flows.

Of course, the capital students inherit and accrue prior to university may be directly relevant to the content of their degree programme. This was true for Chloe, who as a law student, could seek subject-specific advice from her barrister father. Jocelyn, however, was able to deploy cultural capital that was specific to her ethnic background and identity. As a film studies student, her presentation on racist stereotyping and colonial representation in Global North cinema history enabled her to demonstrate embodied black cultural capital through the subject's inclusion on the film theory module curriculum. Preparation initially drew on conversations with her father on how to position her narration as a black woman in a majority white degree programme:

> Our topic was postcolonialism. I'm black, that's a topic I'm going to excel in *[laughs]*. We knew what topics we were going to be doing, so when I went home I was talking to my

> dad about it. And he was like, “Oh that's good, but don’t make it seem like you're shouting at them” *[laughs]*. So when I gave my presentation I didn’t want to seem that I was being like ‘oh, this is your fault’ kind of thing. Do you get what I mean? So, when we had the lecture on it, you can see a shift because we've been talking about just normal stuff and now we’re talking about race, and a lot of people are uneasy about that. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

Jocelyn’s juxtaposition between ‘normal stuff’ and race, together with white students’ unease when studying the latter, highlights how a white disposition is silently centred within much course curricula. This gives the introduction of race – albeit limited to a single topic in the module programme – a ruptural power, and Jocelyn’s feedback both from her lecturers and her peers represented a powerful microaffirmation. This was also an endorsement of a conscious strategy to use her racial identity to her advantage academically:

> There's only like five black people on our course. But I just try to use it to my advantage. You could see when you first walk in because we’re like different specs of colour in a sea of whiteness *[laughs]*. […] When I finished [the presentation] other students came up to me and said, “I never really knew just how it was.” And that stuff like that just warms my heart 'cause like, yeah, I'm cool with that you do now. Especially because I wasn’t uncomfortable about it, I was just saying facts, and asking them questions like, “What are your favourite films that have recently come out?” And they told me. And it's like, “Well do you notice that none of those films are led by a person of colour?” And they were all like, “Oh.” And I was like, “Yeah well, you don’t notice because it doesn’t bother you, and that's okay. But I'm here to tell you that it does bother some people.” So, I think it was informative. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

Definitions of black cultural capital vary across the literature. For Rollock et al (2015), it represents a set of performative strategies for navigating white institutions, whereas for Carter (2003) it is a non-dominant form of cultural capital that only acquires value within specific locales and peer groups to draw boundaries against other racialised groups. Jocelyn’s case is perhaps closer to models advanced by Wallace (2017) and Meghji (2019) in that she demonstrated not only the transferrable power of black knowledge within the higher education field, but also through her embodiment. This allowed her to assert her legitimacy as a student of film while drawing attention to her peers’ implicit centring of whiteness.

In truth, though, there were few instances where students of colour recounted deploying forms of black cultural capital within their degree programme. This may partly reflect the relative lack of decolonised or inclusive curricula at the time interviews were conducted – a deficit which contributors to this volume have since sought to address directly (see chapters nine and ten). It should also be noted, as Wallace (2019) does, that black cultural capital remains a resource primarily deployed by the black middle-classes, thereby representing a privilege not necessarily available to all students of colour. For most of our BAME interviewees, the accrual and conversion of capital primarily focused on the development of peer networks on campus. Recalling Putnam’s (2000) distinction, this can provide a form of bonding social capital which helps student mutually overcome the challenges they face in adjusting to a new field. For residential students, this draws especially on

the ‘instant social network’ provided by halls of residence (Sims et al, 2007:7) which for Charlotte can also compensate for the loss of immediate access to family:

> I'm not really a shy person. When I get into the room I'm just like, “Hi guys” *[laughs]*. At first [my housemates] thought I was a bit crazy because as soon as I got in I was like, “Okay we’re a family now, we’re going to have family dinner”. It was a bit full on, but they got used to it, and it became like a tradition for us. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology – Black African)

Charlotte’s recreation of family rituals helped instil a sense of relatedness at university, which in turn helped develop her feel competent as a student. Recalling her earlier comments from this chapter, these network ties served as an important support network for managing and alleviating pressures she faced in negotiating parental expectations (and misunderstandings). Indeed, for this reason some students sought to establish bonding networks which were more culturally specific. Both Megan and Susan are from East Asian backgrounds, and much like the students from Bhopal’s (2011) study of British Indian women, highlighted the benefit of friendships where common experiences as a specific minority group on campus could be shared:

> There are two girls in my lecture from Hong Kong, and I don’t think we’d be friends if I wasn’t from Hong Kong because people in Hong Kong kind of stick together. The mindset and the culture’s so different. (Megan, BA Psychology – Asian Mixed)

> If they have a similar background there’s more to talk about, so there’s more engagement, compared to someone who I don’t know at all or have nothing in common with. (Susan, BSc Mathematics – Asian Chinese)

Bonding capital is not restricted to the provision of emotional support. The value of making friends from one’s own degree programme can be particularly valuable for collectively accumulating subject and course-specific knowledge (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2002). In the case of Charlotte, this helped her organise her learning and stay on top of deadlines:

> One of my housemates did the same course as me, which is really fun because a lot of the times you just forget about things. He was my alarm clock to get me out of bed in the morning [and] get my essay done on time. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology – Black African)

Building more strategic networks within degree programmes arguably necessitates a more proactive approach. This is evident in how Jocelyn sought to accrue social capital within her film studies programme:

> I had to put myself out there. If I sat next to someone I'd make it a point, I'd go, “Oh hi I'm Jocelyn, how are you liking the course? Have you watched this film that we’re about to watch?” Just stuff like that, just little conversations. I think it's easier in your seminars because there was sometimes pair work or group work. So it's a lot easier to make friends like that… not that you have to be friends, but you have to communicate. So yeah, I just decided even if they don’t like it, I'm going to talk to everyone that's around me. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

Of course, Jocelyn’s proactive strategy in making friends on her degree programme falls within the scope of independent learning. It is questionable, however, how effectively this may serve as a

foundation for developing a more expansive network of support. As has been evidenced throughout this chapter, peer friendships typically lack the perceived risks associated with contacting academic staff as they rest on a common status and purpose. For Frances, the 'expectation to impress' whenever communicating with academic staff limits the scope for such interactions, leaving peer networks as the principal resource of interpersonal support:

> I feel like people are more likely to talk to someone that they could share experiences with. And although *[gestures at interviewer]* you were a student at one point, you're a person of authority, and for me it's just easier to go to my friend, like, "Can you help me with this?" than go to a lecturer, because I've already got the personal connection with my friend. With a lecturer, you know, there's an expectation to impress. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

Conclusion

The persistence of a large white-BAME attainment gap across the vast majority of HEIs in the UK necessitates a more focused investigation of how BAME expectations of learning and teaching at university interact with universities' expectations of students' adaptability for learning and teaching. Evidence presented in this chapter has foregrounded 'independent learning' as the commonly recognised ideal learner strategy in higher education. Implicit within this term is the need to transition to a more individualised programme timetable, and while this involves adjusting to comparatively distanced relationship with academic staff it nevertheless presupposes student reflexivity and proactivity when it comes to identifying and seeking out support.

As this suggests, there are ambiguities within this model, particularly regarding the nature of staff-student dynamics. Though students have access to a wide range of staff contacts – including personal tutors as well as seminar leaders and module conveners – the discourse of independent learning espoused by many student interviewees in this chapter promoted self-reliance and the minimisation of staff interactions. This interpretation is at least partly attributable to the massification and expansion of HEIs, which has necessitated the creation of more voluntaristic models of student support, themes which will be discussed in more detail in chapter eight. For BAME students, especially those from low-income backgrounds and who studied BTEC in further education (see chapter five), this also complemented a desire to avoid 'sticking out' for fear of exposing a sense of unbelonging within a field governed by largely invisible pedagogies.

This points again to the complex interplay of race and class. The desire to avoid 'sticking out' not only reflected perceived racial and cultural differences with academic staff, but also the considerable burden students felt to live up to their own expectations of success. As we saw in the previous chapter, these expectations are partly the outcome of broader marketisation trends which have intensified the pressure to make the 'right choices' that will maximise (largely economic) returns. Moreover, as students of colour they often reflect the high value attached to university education by their family as a vehicle for social mobility and employability within an often-discriminatory labour market. For some students, these expectations were communicated directly by their parents, and while such extrinsic motivations may represent a form of social capital (Modood, 2004) it is not necessarily accompanied with relevant communicative support that students need the most.

This brings us to the forms of capital students of colour are able to deploy and accrue while at university. Possession of black cultural capital can help students gain a sense of autonomy and competence within course curricula and assessment, but it represents a resource principally in the possession of the middle-classes (Wallace, 2017). For students born overseas, academic capital accrued from family may be transnational in form and therefore not necessarily translatable to a UK university setting. According to our findings at least, the most prevalent form of capital available to students is the social capital they accrue themselves while at university. This may involve strategic network building within a degree programme – though this still involves putting oneself 'out there' in ways one might also do with academic staff.

For most students, though, capital accrual involves building peer networks that may aid social relatedness and belonging on campus, including those founded on shared ethnic identities and perspectives. This extends beyond the classroom to include residential halls, sports clubs, societies, and social spaces on campus. Though not directly related to students' attainment, this is a crucial aspect of students' desire for belongingness and the ability to feel competent as a student and will be explored in the following chapter.

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[1] Individual survey respondent data was linked with the University's student records to match responses with data relating to students' ethnicity, postcode region, degree programme, campus, and household income. The

combining of these sources of data was subject to the University's data compliance procedure, with consent taken from all survey participants. The survey dataset was anonymised, and strictly limited for the purposes of Student Success research only.

[2] All student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.

[3] The survey did not return statistically significant results when attempting to capture whether students were first in their family to attend university. This led the research team to question some of the presuppositions of the question. Not only is the 'first in family' discourse considerably weaker than it is in the United States, definitions of family may also vary to include siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, some of whom may have studied overseas. This opens up ambiguities as to what 'social capital' really means in a context of massified higher education system, and one where BAME students' families have been educated to degree level elsewhere across the world.

[4] University of Kent https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/how-to-be-an-independent-learner; Anglia Ruskin University https://aru.ac.uk/anglia-learning-and-teaching/good-teaching-practice-and-innovation/approaches-to-learning-and-teaching/directed-independent-learning; Newcastle University https://www.ncl.ac.uk/academic-skills-kit/study-skills/independent-learning/ University of Bristol https://www.bristol.ac.uk/students/your-studies/study-support/independent-learning/