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‘Everything was going to be really easy for me’: elite schooling, old boys, and transitions to university

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the recounts of a group of ‘old boys’ about their transition from elite schools to university. Analysis of semi-structured interview data reveals that this transition was not always straightforward. Although educational background has traditionally determined access to, and progress through, university, this paper details the challenges that confronted a group of old boys as they negotiated a landscape that did not align with the positionality they had assumed in their schooling. Defining this as a ‘bubble bursting’ moment, the participants relay how negotiations of their positionality provoked a reflexive accounting of what to keep and what to reject in the formation of undergraduate identities. The discourses that surround the educational choices made by elite school students indicate how tightly bound notions of achievement and academic excellence define expectations and concomitant senses of Self. Exposure to a larger, and more diverse student population, as well as changed social strata, resulted in the questioning of the elite school environment and the preparation that it provided. This paper explores a currently under-theorised aspect of the literature to detail how the emotions and feelings that elite school alumni experience frames the transition to university.

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Introduction

Todd: The trajectory that I imagined for myself was that I was going to be quite successful, and I was going to, you know, go to the best [university], and get the best education. ... I think that was the idea. That I was just going to go to a great [university], and everything was going to be really easy for me.

Elite schools are culturally, economically, and socially privileged, with established reputations for channelling alumni into prestigious universities and esteemed employment destinations. Parents with the requisite cultural, economic, and social capital (Bourdieu,

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1986) can propel their children along pathways that traverse the ‘best’ schools, before transitioning to the ‘best’ universities, and eventually, the ‘best’ jobs (Hutchings, 2021). This sentiment is reflected in the opening statement by *Todd*, who indicated that life beyond the school gate would follow a predictable pathway from an elite school to a ‘great university’ – stepping-stones that would ensure his life would be ‘really easy’. While it is well documented that social elites emerge from school with an embodied sense of ease and privilege (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan, 2011), there is comparatively less understanding of how these students conceptualise and negotiate the experience of transitioning to university. Within this transition, contradiction, malleability, and incompleteness likely mark their experience, although this requires further exploration and theorising.

In analysing the narratives of nine old boys¹ who shared their experiences of attending elite boys’ schools in Australia, this paper considers how a particular educational background shapes and informs the transition to university. In doing so, we seek to extend theorisations of university transitions (e.g., Bowles et al., 2014; Gale & Parker, 2014; Gibson et al., 2019; Lawrence, 2001; Morosanu et al., 2010) by interpreting narratives to understand how the attitudes and beliefs acquired through schooling informed this life event.

Elite schools and academic excellence

While all students should receive access to equal educational opportunities, factors such as parental income, place of residence, and secondary schooling continue to shape individual access to higher education and future employment destinations. Indeed, a persistent effect of economic, social, and cultural capital is the transmission of advantage across generations (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Lareau, 2011).

Although a significant proportion of the literature on schooling equality is focussed on disadvantaged and marginalised groups, some scholars have highlighted a need to also ‘study up’ (e.g., Connell et al., 1982; Donaldson, 2003; Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2010; Nader, 1974) to consider how elitism, privilege, and educational advantage are entangled in the perpetuation of inequality. Historically, the key question in elite school research has not been whether these institutions contribute to inequality, but rather how they contribute (Cookson & Persell, 1985). We argue that it is important to understand the contours of elite boys’ schooling, and how the elite school experience affects the transition to university.

Elite schools have access to substantial resources that deliver academic advantages and opportunities for their students. High tuition fees prevent most children and families from accessing these institutions. It is not uncommon for the tuition at an elite boys’ school in Australia to cost more than 30,000 AUD per year, with this outlay purportedly providing students with access to a ‘quality’ education, but also opulent facilities, including orchestra pits, observatories, yoga rooms, and on-campus baristas (Lyons, 2019; O’Flaherty, 2019; Ting et al., 2019). When compared to the median personal income in Australia of approximately 51,000 AUD (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), the financial outlay required to access these learning spaces is significant.

The ability to determine who gets ‘in’, combined with wealth, influence, and the economic resources to invest in sophisticated image management and marketing campaigns,

ensures that elite schools can make gestures towards the superiority of their teaching and learning (Drew, 2013; Drew et al., 2016; Gottschall et al., 2010; Wardman et al., 2010). Perceptions of academic excellence also buttress visions of esteemed employment destinations and positions of leadership, while cultivating an assuredness about innate abilities and talents. In this way, students at elite schools develop the assertiveness and confidence needed to promote themselves, justify their privilege, and defend their suitability as leaders (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan, 2011; Rivera, 2015). It is therefore unsurprising that students who emerge from elite schools have ‘an unquestioned belief in a *right* to a successful future’ (Sparks, 2018, p. 18, emphasis added).

While university entry scores and institutional choice are highly skewed towards privileged students (Burke, 2012), educational background is not always a sound predictor of university achievement and success (Birch & Miller, 2007; Dobson & Skuja, 2005). The available evidence suggests that university students who attended government schools in Australia and New Zealand achieve comparable, if not higher, scores at university after controlling for the socioeconomic background of their school (Li & Dockery, 2015; Shulruf et al., 2008). Results from international studies have also revealed that distinctions in test scores between government and non-government schools disappear after accounting for the socioeconomic backgrounds of students and schools (Cardak et al., 2015; Chrysanthos, 2019). As this suggests, elite schools may not deliver a superior standard of teaching and learning, but they nonetheless produce a disproportionate number of students who transition to universities.

Given that academic differences between government and non-government schooling outcomes largely disappear in higher education, after controlling for the socioeconomic background of school, the right to, or expectation of, a ‘really easy’ and ‘successful’ future is not based on any objective claims to academic or intellectual superiority. However, in the context of an elite, co-educational boarding school in North America, Khan (2011) noted that an implication of this belief is that elite school students ‘consistently overestimate’ their own abilities, and the talents of their peers, falsely determining that if they, or a classmate, are the *best* at academic, athletic, or cultural endeavours, they must *therefore* be remarkable individuals who are destined for greatness at university and beyond.

Theorising university transitions

An extensive body of research on the process of adaption, navigation, and transformation has documented and theorised accounts of transitions to university (e.g., Bowles et al., 2014; Cameron & Rideout, 2022; Gale & Parker, 2014; Gibson et al., 2019; Gravett & Winstone, 2021; Morosanu et al., 2010). While transition studies have drawn on narratives of the graduate experience, other research has sought to engage with the problematic, ambivalent, and contradictory experiences of the transition as a process of ‘becoming’ (e.g., Gravett, 2021).

Emotions and feelings of transition

Students take diverse pathways into university, and they experience complex and contradictory emotions that inform this life event. As such, scholars have framed the Self, which

students form at university, as an emotional, dynamic project that is continually shaped and reshaped through discourse (Lupton, 1998). Specifically, students construct new identities through the process of transitioning into a new learning environment (Christie, 2009). These ‘emotional journeys’ reveal the importance of stories in the formation and shaping of undergraduate identities (Christie et al., 2008). As Christie (2009) argued, exploring the emotional aspects of the transition to university enables researchers to make links between ‘inner emotional worlds and external social and structural processes in order to illustrate the ways in which the transition to university is implicated in wider emotional processes and in the fashioning of the self’ (p. 125). The importance of understanding the transition to university as an emotional experience is further emphasised by the challenges and difficulties that are often associated with this experience, such as feelings of alienation, dissatisfaction, isolation, and loneliness (Briggs et al., 2012; Lawrence, 2001; Mann, 2001; McMillan, 2014; Postareff et al., 2017). As Scanlon et al. (2007) noted, the transition to university can result in a loss of previously taken-for-granted identities, which necessitates the establishment of new connections and identities.

For example, there is a complex and complicated process of identity formation for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and ‘first-in-family’ backgrounds (e.g., Crozier et al., 2019; Lehmann, 2013; Luzecky et al., 2017; Merrill, 2014; Reay et al., 2009; Vanderburg et al., 2022). However, within this literature, there is a paucity of studies that consider the emotions and feelings of students who emerge from schools that are culturally, economically, and socially privileged. While Reay (2005) indicated that there is an element of anxiety associated with the transition to university for all students:

young people from established middle class backgrounds, where there is a history of university attendance, far more often have a coherent story to tell about university choice; one with an easily discernible plot and a clearly defined beginning and end, despite episodic uncertainty and stressful periods. The discourses that they draw on are ones of entitlement and self-realization. (p. 922)

A prominent theme to emerge from the interviews conducted for this project identified that the narratives surrounding university choice were less coherent and reasoned than expected, and that the subsequent transition to undergraduate identities was somewhat unassured. While the participants expected to attend university, there were noticeable periods of uncertainty, indifference, and doubt regarding the program or institution in which they enrolled, and their place within the undergraduate population.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from semi-structured interviews with men who attended elite boys’ schools in Australia. The research project used the personal network of the lead author, who is an old boy of one of these institutions, to locate potential research participants. As has been the case in other studies of elite schools, this research project used the pre-existing relationships (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009) and insider-status (Khan, 2011) of the lead author to identify and connect with potential research participants. This is not dissimilar to the recruitment strategy pursued by a study of men with an elite private education in Chile, which explored themes of shifting gender relations (Madrid, 2013). Within the context of this study, the research strategy

enlisted nine men, aged 25–44 years, who attended six elite boys' schools in Australia. From this cohort, three participants who are indicative of the wider dataset are examined in this paper. As the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lead author used Zoom for all interviews.

The larger study from which these data are drawn investigated the central issue of the feelings old boys attach to their schooling experience in adulthood, with an emphasis on the role of narratives. For this reason, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing for storytelling to occur, and the revealing of underlying intentions and reasoning. As such, the interviews were built around four key themes: (1) school – experiences and impressions of elite boys' schooling; (2) graduation – imagined post-school trajectories; (3) adulthood – study, work, and relationships; and (4) contemporary society – thoughts and observations on gender equality, social inclusion, and workplace diversity. Each topic of discussion had an initial question to enable the participant to commence an exploration of each theme or life stage.

In this paper, we feature three participants – *John*, *Neil*, and *Todd*. These are pseudonyms, with all identifying marks, such as school and university names, being changed to ensure anonymity. The authors selected these participants because their interviews represented indicative themes that emerged more broadly from the cohort. The use of a small number of participants to explore identity formation among elite school students has been adopted by previous studies (e.g., Howard et al., 2014).

Participants

John is 38 and arrived at *Bridge Academy* in Grade 7 on a half-academic scholarship. As a student, he excelled academically, while also achieving high status as an athlete and leader. After school, he completed an Arts/Law degree at a Group of Eight university.²

Neil is 25 and enrolled at *Rivercity Grammar School* in Grade 5, where his father was a teacher. As such, he received a generous tuition discount offered to staff members. As a student, he was an atheist, sensitive, and held socialist beliefs, which placed him as an outsider within the 'conservative, Christian, White, upper-middle-class' bubble of Rivercity. He gained a Bachelor of Education, before completing a Master of Educational Studies at a Group of Eight university.

Todd is 25 and attended *Bourke College* from Prep. Enrolled by his parents to benefit from high academic standards and scholastic expectations, like Neil he struggled within a school culture he explained as being hyper-masculine, homophobic, and racist. He arrived at the *Talbot Institute of Technology* on a full-academic scholarship, where he studied a Bachelor of Film and Television. Additional biographical details for each participant are contained in the findings below, and where appropriate, data are provided from additional participants to highlight how particular representations were present across the interview cohort.

Analytical framework

The study adopted narrative analysis, and the theoretical focus was orientated towards the meaning of elite boys' schooling and its application as a discursive resource in the process of reflecting on, and re-evaluating, contemporary formations of selfhood.

While the analysis had a particular focus on language, it is important to note that this paper does not seek to critique individual participants. Instead, it exposes the discourses that operated throughout the narratives, to analyse how they were deployed, often unintentionally, in the sharing of stories about transitioning to university.

The process of analysis and theorising highlighted how schooling experiences are reconfigured to align with contemporary social values, including those surrounding diversity, equality, and inclusion. From this perspective, the positionality of the old boys was conceptualised as the product of a complex rendering of self-reflection that combined rationalisations of the elite school experience with criticism of the practices and values that defined this modality of education.

Key themes identified in this paper emerged through the process of writing. Specifically, they became apparent by adopting a process that Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) referred to as ‘writing as a method of inquiry’ (p. 960). In writing and thinking about the experiences of John, Neil, and Todd, a creative analytical practice generated valid, but also engaging, representations of their social worlds. Through this practice, it was possible to make inquiries that revealed deeper issues about elite boys’ schooling and its place in university transition. Like Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), a ‘great part of that inquiry is accomplished in the writing because ... writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery’ (p. 967).

Findings and discussion

In the sections that follow, we outline key themes that emerged from the data. Theme one considers how feelings of uncertainty and indifference both challenge and constrain expected pathways into university for old boys. Theme two addresses the experience of arriving at university and the bias that alumni carry into these learning environments. The final theme considers university as a site that challenges preconceived notions of excellence and intelligence, and the participants experiences of ‘bubble bursting’ moments.

‘I don’t think I had a very good forward-looking plan’: preparing for university

The participants shared similar trajectories following their education at an elite boys’ school. All but one attended university after completing high school, with the majority gaining entry to prestigious universities across Australia. Of the nine old boys, the most common degree was Arts/Law ($n = 3$), while others pursued qualifications in Communications ($n = 1$), Economics ($n = 1$), Education ($n = 1$), Film and Television ($n = 1$), and Fine Arts ($n = 1$). Regardless of the pathway they traversed, the participants relayed a consistent narrative that emphasised the value of further study, as well as a recognition that attendance at a prestigious university was an ‘expectation’ imparted by their schools. This is consistent with existing research that indicates students from privileged backgrounds view the transition to university as a natural step in an inevitable pathway (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Of the eight participants who pursued higher education, the majority attended Group of Eight universities ($n = 7$).

As noted at the beginning of this paper, Todd had expected that his transition to university would be ‘easy’ and would follow a defined trajectory of success. However, his

experience, and that of other participants, suggested that university transitions were not always straightforward. *Neil* revealed that his pathway beyond the school gate was far more ambiguous and ill-defined than he had initially expected. He explained that his post-school pathway was something that had been atypical for an old boy. After completing secondary school, Neil explained that he 'just did like a year of working as a barista and doing music,' releasing an EP of original music while figuring out his pathway. Eventually, he enrolled in journalism, before transferring to education, explaining that the expected programs of engineering, law, and medicine 'just didn't appeal to my interests'. Instead, he positioned himself as creative, critical, and individualistic, relative to his peers who had followed a more conventional pathway.

The feeling of uncertainty has a significant position in the story provided by Neil, as well as in the shaping of his subsequent undergraduate identity. This marks an important link between his inner and external worlds. From a poststructural perspective, this story signals an important process of meaning and representation (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Specifically, it reveals that an emotional tension occurs when one is unable, or unwilling, to follow the expected trajectory through a prestigious university toward high-status jobs. The use of language, which labelled traditional programs of study as unappealing, positions Neil as being outside the normative old boy identity, offering him different possibilities for being an undergraduate. In pursuing university study for alternative reasons, such as enjoyment and personal interest, as opposed to it being an inevitable step towards high-status employment, Neil constructed himself as being different to expectations.

John shared that he had shown little interest in researching his university options while a student and had failed to consider what he would like to study beyond secondary school. Despite enrolling in Arts/Law at a highly prestigious university, he indicated that:

I don't think I had a very good forward-looking plan for what I wanted to do outside of school. The idea of the prestigious degree or prestigious career, it came to me without much more of a further plan.

John conceded that, 'I walked out of the school gates with no plan for what I was going to be doing, but just the expectation it was going to be great'. This, like the narrative shared by Todd, indicates that on leaving the elite school environment, there is an assumed assuredness, which is translated to an expectation that transitioning to university would be 'easy' and 'great', offering a continuation of their social position.

Being educated in an environment that is culturally, economically, and socially privileged can produce a belief that future economic and social positions are, at least partially, guaranteed (Irwin & Elley, 2011). As Maxwell and Aggleton (2013) argued, in a study of privately educated young women, this can result in the future being 'understood not as a place of difficulty, but as a destination in which new opportunities will present themselves' (p. 89). The casual and indifferent approach towards university preparation identified by John links with existing research on the cultivation of accomplished and assured identities that manifest in an 'assumption of continued lifestyle across generations' (Irwin & Elley, 2011, p. 489). This unstructured approach towards university preparation, which is contrasted with an assured belief that the transition would be 'easy' and 'great', aligns with theories of social advantage that emphasise the persistent effect of structural material security on personal choice (Bottero, 2004). In this instance, economic privilege, and its associated advantages, may result in future pathways being taken for granted, with

less strategic effort being required to maintain the belief that ‘opportunities will present themselves’. However, this has consequences, with feelings of doubt and unease emerging from stories about unexamined opportunities and unexplored careers. In sharing stories about his degree choice, John noted that ‘it never occurred to me to do Commerce/Arts, which is, now I look back, is entirely what I should have done’. Indeed, of the three participants who studied Arts/Law, none pursued employment in the legal profession, each eschewing any desire for this career pathway by the conclusion of undergraduate study. While this experience was explored in the wider research project, graduate trajectories are not the focus of this paper.

‘I was a little ashamed’: restricting post-school pathways

While other participants were more certain about career pathways beyond the school gate, this did not necessarily mean that their transition to university was uncomplicated. Unlike most students at Bourke College, Todd defined himself as ‘creative and imaginative’. More than anything, he aspired to be an artist. Although he knew the program that would best prepare him for a creative industries career, the host university lacked the prestige and quality expected by his school. He shared feeling extreme ‘pressure to enrol at [Bowen University] just because it was recognised as the better university to go to, and the other [universities], were kind of, I guess, embarrassing to get into’. Although the *Talbot Institute of Technology* offered Todd a full-academic scholarship, he shared a scepticism of the institution, which cast doubt on the decision to enrol. In a story about his first semester of university he explained that:

I was a little bit ashamed about [going to Talbot] because I had such a high ATAR.³ Even when I started, I remember looking around at all the students and thinking like, which of these kids went to private school? Like, which of these kids are the good students? Because in my head, I was like, [government] school kids like, they’re not going to be able to study as well as me. I need to seek out those people [private school students] and become friends with them because they will help me get good grades here.

Unlike the other participants, who enrolled at Group of Eight universities, embarrassment and shame were prominent in the transition to university for Todd. Specifically, the expectation to attend the ‘best’ university initially constrained his decision-making and limited the range of pathways available. This revelation identified how expectations frame the sense of Self and the configuration of possible identities. As an elite school student, it was an expectation to not only achieve, but achieve by adhering to prescribed educational choices and undergraduate identities.

The story provided by Todd also points toward how elite school alumni might make sense of educational environments they perceive as being less prestigious, as well as the bias and entitlement they can carry into university. As Poynting and Donaldson (2005) noted, the hostility and intolerance that are learned at elite boys’ schools, are often carried beyond the gate and into university colleges. While Talbot enabled Todd to begin the process of exploring new identities and formations of self, his choice of university was immediately challenged and regulated by discourses of prestige, privilege, but also intelligence. As Reay (2005) noted, in a study of secondary education, ‘reductionist discourses in which clever becomes correlated with middle class and stupid with working class were

evident in both students' and teachers' discourses' (p. 918). In this instance, Todd was able to re-establish himself at Talbot as a hardworking student who would achieve 'good grades', maintaining his sense of being a high achiever. This is consistent with previous research that has noted how words, such as 'cleverness' and 'intelligence', can be deployed by individuals as metaphors for highly class-specific forms of knowledge (Lawler, 2000). Indeed, Todd later commented:

I had a good foundation at school. I was given the language. I could write an essay and it could be recognised academically ... I'm not sure other schools, and friends who went to other schools, necessarily feel like this is something they developed.

Despite enrolling at what he perceived to be a less prestigious institution, Todd extended a performance that was originally embodied at school. However, the feelings of embarrassment and shame remained important to the reconfiguration of his identity as an undergraduate. While the 'masculinity of success' that is present in elite boys' schools has been theorised as being emotionless and rational (Poynting & Donaldson, 2005), the experience shared by Todd would suggest that this conceptualisation obscures the presence of a sensitive and troubled set of feelings that are implicated in identity formation for some old boys. In pursuing his desired program of study, a tension was created with the feeling that he would no longer be surrounded by the 'best of the best' (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009), necessitating him to both 'seek out' private school students, while also undertaking emotional and intellectual effort to reconcile his notion of Self within a new social stratum.

'There was a huge bubble burst moment': transitioning to university

A 'bubble bursting' moment was common in the stories participants shared about transitioning to university. Within their stories, the participants reflected at length about the difficulties they experienced interacting with people who did not share similar educational and social backgrounds. By internalising the educational discourses of elite boys' schools and adopting the social scripts of having emerged from exceptional academic environments, the participants engaged in performances that made them intelligible as privileged, while also informing their perceptions of, and interactions with, other students. However, these performances were not fixed, and university presented an opportunity for the participants to break from preceding performances and re-evaluate the experience of an elite education. At the point of transition to university, leaving the elite school bubble meant eschewing at least those meanings and associations that defined the school experience but were no longer helpful.

Chris shared how his transition to university had challenged his perceptions of academic excellence and intelligence, which he had embodied during his time at *Albion House*. Specifically, in transitioning to university he encountered students from the government system, which was pivotal in how he viewed himself and reconfigured his identity. Chris explained that:

There was a huge bubble burst moment, like, where it all sort of made sense to me. Where the girl whose notes I would copy at uni, who was the brightest girl in the entire cohort, went to the local [government] school. It was like, all that stuff we were taught was bullshit.

Throughout his time at Albion, Chris had explained how he had been encouraged to feel ‘better than others’. However, the ‘bubble bursting moment’ of encountering an exceptional student with an educational background and gender that he had assumed to be inferior proved significant. Similarly, Todd described that:

Making friends with people at university who went to [government] schools made me realise that they were switched on in a way that I didn’t think I was ... That’s when I started to realise that I’ve been in a very sheltered bubble for a long time.

Other participants, such as John, reflected on the feeling of importance and specialness that was cultivated at school, and the implications of this in his transition to university. This was particularly evident in the account as follows:

One thing [Bridge Academy] does create, and I think that all those schools create, is a very rarefied environment where they’re very good at making that small world your entire world ... I remember the very jarring experience of going to university. ... I wasn’t important anymore.

In this narrative, John described his school as being distant from the lives and concerns of most people, where his experience had been intimate, prescribed, and sanitised. A celebrated athlete, student leader, and scholar within Bridge Academy, he had been an important and influential member of an exclusive and selective community. From his perspective, this was an identity that had failed to support his transition to university and left him feeling unimportant.

Conclusion and implications: social emotions and university transition

For elite school alumni, transitions to university involve a process of identity formation, through which they might be required to navigate complex feelings such as embarrassment, indifference, shame, and uncertainty. Social discourses inform and shape these internal feelings of future lifestyles, prestige, excellence, and specialness, which the participants embodied at school.

Elite boys’ schools establish expectations for attending prestigious universities, as well as imagined futures in highly esteemed employment destinations such as engineering, law, and medicine. However, the findings presented here illustrate that exposure to a diverse student population and changed social strata at university can productively challenge these feelings. As indicated by the participants, transitioning to university can be a jarring experience. For those with a culturally, economically, and socially privileged background, such an experience can necessitate reflection on the habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) – practices, traditions, and values – from which one has emerged. This experience can elicit complex and contradictory feelings that inform how young men navigate the transition into university and negotiate their identities as undergraduates.

The findings provided in this paper support, and extend, previous research that conceptualises university transitions as ‘emotional journeys’ that students make meaningful through the sharing of stories (Christie et al., 2008). Further, the discursive aspect of the journeys provided by the research participants emphasises the links between social and structural processes and the emotional process of identity formation (Christie, 2009). Importantly, this paper has illuminated the complexities and contradictions of the

processes of self-reidentification, discomfort and unease that arose from university transitions.

Further, the findings revealed the persistence of structural material security in the positionality of old boys and their transition to university. There is also evidence that the participants continue to be constituted through larger discourses of society and remain constrained by imagined futures and continued lifestyles. In this instance, transition to university elicited troubling and uncomfortable feelings, which required significant reflection on their conceptualisation of ability, intelligence, opportunity, and prestige. While this was important in the reconfiguration of their identity as undergraduate students, this sense-making does not diminish notions of assured futures and individual success.

The analysis outlined in this paper challenges the proposition that the transition to university for elite school students is automatic and unproblematic. We suggest that a more nuanced understanding of university transitions is needed for students from elite educational backgrounds. There is a need to extend empirical and theoretical considerations of university transitions. For example, the accounts offered by the old boys reported in this paper reveal that complex negotiations of Self informed the transition to university. In sharing accounts of their experiences, the old boys revealed how the elite school 'bubble' had necessitated a process of re-evaluation after transitioning to university and encountering a diverse network of students. Arrival at university had proven a jarring experience, with exposure to social disadvantage, academic competition from unexpected sources, and a loss of self-importance requiring the reidentification and modification of the old boy image.

The stories shared by the participants revealed how the discursive resource of elite boys' schooling determines accounts of Self that are not readily transferrable beyond the school gate. The old boys subsequently curated narratives about their transitions to university that simultaneously rationalised their old boy positionality within the wider social contexts of their university experience. This identity work countered the experiences of their schooling and, as a result, caused these old boys to question assumptions regarding the 'naturalness' of their capabilities and intelligence, as well as claims toward *success*. Understanding the complexity associated with transitions to university will provide a basis for more nuanced understandings of the ways in which privilege and educational advantage function and circulate. Taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the maintenance of privilege may not be as durable as thought, nor reflect the experiences of undergraduates.

Notes

1. The term 'old boy' emerged in England during the 1860s to denote former students of an English Public School. The term has become widely used, especially in countries that are former colonies of the British Empire.
2. The Group of Eight are the top ranking, research-intensive universities, within Australia and are nationally recognised as the most prestigious institutes for higher learning.
3. The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student's position relative to all the students in their age group. Universities use

the ATAR to help them select students for their courses and admission to most tertiary courses.

Ethics approval

Ethical Clearance for the project reported in this paper was issued by the host university, Human Research Ethics Approval Number: H19REA287. All participants provided informed consent before inclusion in the research program discussed in this paper.

Disclosure statement

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