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Version: Accepted Version

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Studies in Higher Education on 17/08/2017, available online:
http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03075079.2017.1364718

Bookishness, blue skies, bright hats and brickies: discourse and positioning in academics' conversations around 'academic intelligence' and the 'good' student.

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Abstract

This study is an interpretative discourse analysis (following Gee, 2005, 2011; and Willig, 2008), of three focus group conversations between academics in higher education during which talk centred around the topic of 'academic intelligence'. The research attended to the ways in which the academics discursively produced 'academic intelligence' and related social constructs, and how these constructs engendered discussion about 'good' students. The findings are discussed in three thematic sections: 'conceptual [un]ease'; 'bookishness, blue skies and brickies'; and 'resistance and reproduction.' The paper draws attention to the ways in which constructions of 'natural' academic intelligence underpin the illusion of meritocracy and justify academic hierarchy, whilst masking inequalities in educational practice.

Introduction

This paper offers an interpretative discursive analysis of the ways university-based academics talked about 'academic intelligence' and related social constructs, and about the 'good' student during three focus group conversations. The key research questions were as follows:

- How do participants manage the different discourses about 'academic intelligence' (or related ideas) that they draw upon in these conversations?
- How do participants position themselves in relation to the different discourses produced, in relation to other participants, and in relation to their roles as teachers and institutional representatives in higher education?

Within mainstream psychological and educational discourse, 'intelligence' has high status as a desirable and observable cognitive object, and as such, 'intelligence', as a word or suggestion in everyday talk, arguably carries discursive weight. Long understood by cognitive scientists to refer to something unitary, stable and measurable ('g', see Spearman, 1904,Jensen, 1998 and still robustly defended, see Ritchie, 2015), 'intelligence' has been reduced in much scientific discourse to IQ score; and IQ tests still retain a particular authority, 'IQism', both in the education systems of the West and in the popular imagination (Dorling, 2015). This view of intelligence has been challenged, albeit gently, by the promotion of other constructs both from within Psychology (e.g. ideas of malleable intelligence, Blackwell & Dweck, 2007 and theories of emotional intelligence or 'EQ' e.g. MacCann, 2010), and by lay constructs of common-sense or practical intelligence as a contrast to 'bookishness', IQ, or educational achievement (see for example, the news article by Spicer, 2016). More emphatic challenges to 'IQism' (Dorling, 2015) are abundant in the sociological and philosophical literature which explores the socially constructed and ideological character of 'intelligence' or academic 'ability' (see, Apple, 2006; Danziger, 1997; Bourdieu, 1986; Ranciere, 1987/1991; Dei, 2010). Danziger (1997), for example, points towards the political use of psychometric testing as a tool in the social production of 'intelligence' as a statistically measurable characteristic of individuals; Dorling (2015) decries the construct of inherent academic ability as a product of fear-driven elitism; and Dei (2010) recognises the racism inherent in the way 'success' in education is enacted in western-style education systems. The ways educators talk about 'intelligence' in connection to their practice and to their students can thus be rather discursively complex.

The position taken in this paper is that narrow, psychological constructions of 'intelligence' underpin institutionally established ideas about 'academic intelligence'; in other words,

someone considered to have good academic 'ability' is someone who is considered likely to have a high 'intelligence' in this traditional sense. This paper considers that these traditional ideas of 'intelligence' (i.e. intelligence as measured by IQ tests) and thus also 'academic intelligence' or 'academic ability' play a key role in the way many courses are designed, how many subjects are taught, and how learners are graded from schooling in the early years through to post-graduate study. They conjure the 'truth' of meritocracy and thus help to maintain the power and privilege of elite populations (Dorling, 2015; Apple, 2006). 'Intelligence' and the subsequently assumed 'ability' to do well at school have been understood as things people 'have' in different amounts; and on this basis, children have been funnelled into schools with differentiated access to particular subjects and styles of teaching and with correspondingly different opportunities to become academically successful; they have been separated into streamed classes, within which expectations of progress are often pre-set, and arguably self-fulfilling (Kennet & Keefer, 2006). At the higher education level in the UK the same divisions continue via the sorting of learners into 'old' and 'new' universities along well-established hierarchical lines (Leahy, 2012). Within universities there still persists a strong bias towards those 'good' learners who can perform in a narrow, Eurocentric 'academic' manner, even if traditional notions of 'intelligence' are not foregrounded. That is, if a learner can 'do' academic talk and writing, something owed much to cultural background, they have a significant advantage (MacCay & Devlin, 2014; Bourdieu, 1986). Expectations of academic success are not evenly distributed: there is evidence to show that people of colour, unsupported disabled people, people from poorer backgrounds, and in certain fields, women, are less likely to be considered 'good' students or be labelled as academically successful or highly intelligent when compared to their white, male, 'able', middle or upper class counterparts (Reay et al. 2005; Shiner & Noden, 2015; McKay & Devlin, 2014; Madriaga et al. 2011; Ryan, 2005).

All learners, and indeed educators, are taught to recognise where they fall in the intellectual hierarchy, and by extension, in the hierarchy of comparative human value (Ecclestone & Goodley, 2016). They learn this through their interactions with each other and with their parents (e.g. Altermatt et al. 2002), with their teachers (Aronson & Steele, 2005), as well as through perceived success and failure and through their placement according to grades given and educational levels achieved (Dei, 2010). In all of these conversations and achievements (or lack of), ideologically-driven voices are reproduced and recombined, to articulate the truths of the student's present self-in-context (see Bakhtin, 1981, on the multivoicedness of meaning). Over time, there comes to exist the 'bright' student, and also the 'weak' one (Aronson & Steele, 2005; Varenne & McDermott, 1999), and in the latter case, the one who is a little less 'human' (Ecclestone & Goodley, 2016). Moreover, it is the poor student who is consistently seen to have less of this special merit and value (Dorling, 2015). The current paper holds that being 'bright' or 'stupid' is achieved through discourse; in other words, people come to understand who they are, what academic abilities they have and how these abilities are valued through talk and text. Talk, therefore, was the focal point the current research.

The talk of people who teach in higher education was chosen as the specific focus of the paper for a number of reasons. Firstly, academics' talk about 'academic intelligence' and related ideas about students' ability and suitability for, and value within, higher education was considered relevant to issues of equality and inclusion in higher education. There is relative freedom in higher education for academics to set their own curricula and choose a

preferred means of assessment. There are of course limits to this, and increasingly there is a drive for efficiency and student satisfaction as the primary concerns. However, it does mean that some academics still have wriggle room to create more inclusive learning environments. Secondly, as universities become increasingly subject to the neoliberal drive to produce employable, neatly-boxed graduates, there is pressure on academic staff to give less attention to issues which are not of concern to the marketplace (Johnson 2008). In practice this is likely to mean universities are less motivated to concern themselves with inclusion of marginalised groups and learning differences (unless it is to commodify them, see Runswick-Cole, 2014). The neoliberalist production of straightforward educational successes and failures is fundamentally at odds with an ethos of learning in higher education which at its best encourages risk-taking, uncertainty, mistake-making, 'failure', critical thinking, and participation in a rich community of learning. Individual academics may or may not approve of the marketisation of their sector, but, situated at the heart of teaching and learning practice, they are in a unique position to shift the direction of the conversations in their classrooms one way or another. Asking academics what they think about the construction of 'academic intelligence' in the higher education context is therefore interesting because it provides a space for competing discourses on what makes a 'good' student to be produced and interrogated.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this research was rooted in the understanding that social realities are constructed via discourse (Willig, 2008); and in the recognition of text as a site for analysis (following Gee, 2005; 2011). It also incorporates Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré's theory of subject positioning in texts and conversations (Davies & Harré, 1999). It is also important to state here that this work was necessarily interpretivistic: not only was the author's analysis shaped by her own experience as a researcher and educator, and by the aims of the research, but the process of data collection and choice of questions co-produced the conversations and the constructs identified. Thus paper acts as an 'authorisation' (Smith, 1978) of one particular interpretation of the text, and it is recognised that very different interpretations would be possible. This does not, however, mean that the current interpretation is without value.

Discourse analytical work is very varied, and proceeds from some quite different philosophical starting points. The current work is concerned both with the local conversational interaction in its own right, and in the ways in which the wider ideological landscape shapes what is being said and not being said. While this work recognises the relative stability of certain linguistic structures, it also considers language to be more fluid than Critical Discourse Analysis commonly does (Gee, 2011). The uses of particular words and structures mean different things depending on who is using them, and where they are using them, and therefore attending to linguistic structure above all would not be suitable for the research questions of this work. The chosen approach allows for attention to what Willig (2008) calls 'discursive practices' (what talk is doing) and 'discursive resources' (what discourses speakers are drawing upon in interaction), and in combination with Davies and Harré's (1999) work, this enables attention to where and how people locate themselves in relation to the discourses drawn upon.

Focus groups were considered to be a useful aid to the production of rich and broad conversation for analysis. The intention was for participants to 'bounce off' each others'

narratives and subject positions (after Davies & Harré, 1999); to support, resist, or distance themselves from the myriad 'voices' (Bakhtin, 1981) likely to be heard in the course of conversation.

Participants

Sixteen academic staff across five faculties within an 'old' UK university took part in this study. The sixteen participants were divided into two focus groups of five and one of six. There were roughly equal numbers of men and women. One participant came from a black or minority ethnic (BME) background, and three further participants were not of British origin, but were settled as scholars in the UK. To protect confidentiality, it is not stated in this study to which category each participant belongs. Further identifying information is not included, on request by a number of the participants.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected by the author during the focus groups through the use of initial opening questions around the topic of 'academic intelligence'. The author then followed the lines of conversation opened by participants' initial answers, which led to much discussion of what makes for a 'good' student in particular academic fields. The author encouraged participants to take the conversation where they wished to around the topic, and to do this, follow up questions were used which may have been open or closed, as well as phrases like 'mmm, that's interesting' and 'can you tell me more about that?' The main purpose was to allow the conversation to develop with as little as possible involvement by the author. However, it is clear that the author had a significant impact upon where the discussions led, and the author's own words were included in the interpretative analysis.

The author transcribed the data, numbered each line of the texts, and read through the texts several times as means to gain familiarity with them. The author then analysed the textual data using three different levels of coding:

Stage one: The author asked 'how is 'intelligence' being constructed in the conversation?' (following Willig, 2008), and made brief notes in the margin of the page as an answer to this question. This code was structured using the word 'as…..'; for example intelligence 'as an explanatory fiction'. The author looked both for explicit and implicit references to 'intelligence'. The author read through the texts multiple times, noting themes. This work was ongoing as the author entered into the second layer of coding.

Stage two: The author returned to each text, this time asking the question 'how are the different constructions of 'intelligence' (or similar) being produced?' that is, 'what discourses are being drawn upon or are speaking through these constructs?' and 'what assumptions are explicit or implicit in this process of discursive construction?' This stage was more complex and more interpretative than the first. Of interest were word and phrase 'choices', the grammatical structures used, and the metaphors employed. This stage was based upon Gee's 'toolkit for discourse analysis' which helps the analyst to attend to the ways topics are discursively produced (Gee, 2011). The author grouped these codes into potential themes. This work was ongoing as the author entered into stage three.

Stage three: The focus of this analytical stage was upon the positions the participants took in relation to their own and others discursive constructions around intelligence or 'academic

intelligence' and the 'good' student (Davies and Harré, 1999). Here the author asked the questions 'how do the participants position themselves in relation to particular constructs, and to other participants, and to their professional roles?' The codes in this stage were structured again using the word 'as…'. For example, participant X positioned herself 'as a resister within'. The author made additional notes, where relevant, in answer to the more complex questions included in this stage. The outcomes of each stage were then combined to produce the themes discussed below.

Findings and discussion

This section draws together the findings from the different stages of analysis in order to address the research questions of this paper in the richest possible manner. The paragraph below offers an overview of the relevant constructions identified following the first layer of analysis. The subsequent subsections are organised around three themes: conceptual [un]ease; bookishness, blue skies and brickies; and resistance and reproduction. In each of the themed sections selected extracts from the conversations are reproduced in order to centre the discussion, though due to the quantity of data, the few extracts included can only act as examples of wider patterns, discourses and positionings. All participants' words were given the same due attention in the analysis, but for the purposes of clarity and coherence in this paper, some participants are not directly quoted and some are quoted more than once. The groups were comprised as follows (names given are pseudonyms chosen to reflect the gender of the participants):

Group 1:
Raphael
Lawrence
Jamilla
Nathan
Thomas

Group 2:
Liam
Cleo
Joel
Judith
Kevin
Oli

Group 3:
Lucy
Eleanor
Paula
Sammy
Dylan

The participants found many ways of talking about what 'academic intelligence' can mean in the context of higher education, and beyond. The author sorted the various constructions named during the first layer of analysis into six broad categories: as a socially constructed object; as an innate (relatively) fixed ability; as a set of attitudes; as a particular set of skills/ performances in educational spaces; as 'playing the game'; and as multiple, malleable and contextual. In all, the conversations were characterised by a lack of individual loyalty to a particular construct of intelligence or 'academic intelligence'; in other words, even those participants who were at one point vocally committed to a given meaning for intelligence would switch to a different discourse at a later point in the conversation, often with little recognition of contradiction. However, some individuals appeared to show a preference for one, two or three constructs, and some maintained a strong discomfort with a particular construct throughout (namely, intelligence 'as an innate, fixed ability'). The research questions for this study ask about the ways in which these discourses were produced and managed, and about the positioning of the participants (please see introduction), so this paragraph is purposefully brief to allow space for a fuller thematic discussion below. Whilst considering this thematic discussion, it is important to hold in mind the breadth of discourses

which participants had made available during the conversations, and to remember the patchy consistency of individuals' commitments to any of the named discourses.

Conceptual [un]ease

The construction of (academic) intelligence as innate and (partly) predetermined was produced with caution by the participants. The language used to make conversational space for this construction was marked by hesitation, and apology. However, participants who positioned themselves as unequivocally in opposition to such constructions did not use similarly apologetic or hesitant language. This use of language suggests that participants shared understandings around the social acceptability of particular discourses; and suggests that, in this context, it was easier for some participants to bring the conversation around to a discussion of what makes a 'good' student.

An example of this is given in the first extract below. Here, attention is given to the ways Paula constructs an affiliation with 'traditional notions of intelligence'. In prior conversational turns, participants had been discussing the idea that intelligence may have a strong cultural element. Paula recognises this conversational direction, and sets up her subtle opposition to it, with her opening '[i]t's a difficult construct'; and also through the embedding of a more traditional position between two stanzas which purposefully replicate the views of others in the group, and as such soften her central position and help to protect her speaker relationships.

Square brackets indicate conversational overlap.

Extract 1

Paula: er, I, It is a difficult construct. If I start thinking about from outside the academic
        en[viron]ment
Author: [mm]

Paula: um, words like problem solving, reasoning, adaptability, um, reflection, that comes
        easily, that comes into my mind, I'm also tempted to say that we have as a society
        that we have this traditional notion of intelligence, don't we? And the notions are
        always about, so Einstein must have been very very clever. I just simply wonder if
        Einstein wasn't just very very clever, he was just very interested in what he was
        doing, you know, and
        that that [curiousity] drove him, rather than
Author: [yes yes   ]

Paula: his brain was somehow, but, I suppose, we are not talking about genius and I don't
        want to lead, to enter into that territory, but, just briefly, I suppose it's the whole kind
        of, if you were keen and curious, you may develop and reach that level, but then from
        a developmental point of view, from a child developmental point of view, and so on,
        there is some evidence to show that some people never reach that top level of
        reasoning,
Author: right

Paula: that they never reach that sort of you know [problem] solving at the calculus level

Author: [right   ]

Author: yes

Paula: you know, they never never understand this. But, again you could argue that's
because they were interested in other things. I suppose these days, I'd have respect
for someone who is accomplished, whether that is accomplished in plumbing, baking,
or being a good housewife [I mean] I
Author: [yeah   ]

 'It's difficult construct' does a job of recognising a technical difficulty of defining intelligence, as well as a difficulty with the political sensitivity of discussions around this topic. Paula also starts off by constructing a separation between what intelligence can mean inside and outside of the academy, which she repeats at the end of the given extract. Her lead up to the central position in the extract is done gradually, and softly with use of phrases like 'I'm tempted to say' and 'I suppose' and through her use of 'we' and 'don't we?' which shift the possession of the traditional position into societal and group ownership, rather than something she is choosing individually to identify with. Her traditional position on intelligence is again foregrounded with 'if you were keen and curious, you may develop and reach that level' (by which is inferred Einstein's 'genius') before she is able to a take up a very strong position upon the limits of 'reasoning' ability for some people. Paula draws upon the psychological discourse ('developmental…child developmental' 'level of reasoning') to underpin her statement, and combines this with a formal, academic register 'there is some evidence to show that' to give weight to her statement 'some people never reach that top level of reasoning.' This middle stanza sets up reasoning and problem solving as extremely desirable goods which are largely predetermined. The thrice use of 'never' also helps to set up an absolute limit upon some people's abilities. The linguistic tools Paula used here were characteristic of all instances in the focus group conversations where the narrow psychological view of intelligence was constructed favourably. During analysis, this pattern lent strength to the recognition that an idea of certain 'abilities' (which are thought of as part of 'intelligence' according to IQ, such as 'reasoning') as fixed, predetermined, and innate was one which was problematic to admit to holding.

In the next extract, Joel positions himself in complete opposition to the idea of intelligence as fixed, innate ability. It may also be important to note that this extract is taken from near the beginning of the conversation, before participant relationships had become more familiar; a fact which makes the length and style of this turn more significant.

<u>Extract 2</u>

Joel: Um I've come to think of intelligence as um an explanatory fiction. Now, what I mean
by that is, it obviously has explanatory value because it's it's very widely used in
conversa[tion]
Author: [right]

Joel: *It it means something to people. But um but I say it's a fiction because I'm*

convinced that you can't measure it. All you can do is measure somebody's performance and observe somebody's performance. And so you can say that they have achieved a certain level of performance or attainment. And then the introduction of the notion of intelligence is it does, it takes two steps forward from an observation of performance, this is as I see it. The first step is um it's inferential, it says that because somebody's done something that they can do it, um which is not unreasonable in many cases, I mean when somebody sort of swims a width in the swimming pool you would sort of say, well, they've swum a width, they can swim a width, in that's not unreasonable, but it could be that somebody has done something in a particular context, but maybe they can't do something in the same thing in a different context but more more hazardously as far as that inference is concerned, maybe they haven't done something in a particular context and you infer that they can't. But in fact in a different context they can. So the inference itself is a level of detachment [from]

Author: [*mmm*]

Joel: the reality of an observation. Now that that I think weakens the notion but much worse is the fact that it becomes an essentialist label, so you do a test of some kind and we say, ok, she's got this mark so she's THIS.*

Author: mmm

Joel: she is THIS. There's a THISness about you hhahh you know haha

Joel uses direct assertive speech with a notable lack of hedging, softening, or apology despite the strength of his positioning. His statements are often framed by words and phrases which indicate certainty or as least emphatic assurance: 'obviously', 'very', 'all you can do', 'I'm convinced', 'you can't', 'the fact that', 'much worse', '[n]ow'; and his position is justified further through the narrative opener 'I've come to think' which constructs a personal, gradual and thoughtful learning journey. The use of 'explanatory fiction' as a label for Joel's theory does discursive labour typical in academic writing: by giving his theory a novel, formalised name it achieves a robust status both for the idea and its creator (Joel). There is also an assumption that others in the group will recognise 'essentialist label' as a negative, which in turn draws upon a social constructionist discourse which attempts both to demolish stable entities and deconstruct human labelling. When compared to Paula's tentative and careful talk, Joel's discussion was direct and bold. The point is not to dismiss the truths of either of these extracts, but to note the different ways these discourses were produced, and to question why this might have been so.

Bookishness, Blue Skies and Brickies

When innate intelligence as a construct was tentatively produced, it was frequently paired with a division between academic-type intelligence and something like common sense, practical ability or creativity. This enabled speakers to maintain as acceptable the idea that only some people have a university-level of academic ability and suitability: others may be equally intelligent, but they are intelligent in a different way. It was also indicative of a set of shared assumptions about what kinds of intelligence are suitable for what kinds of task.

Three extracts are offered in this section: they each achieve division of people into binary types which are matched to particular tasks or roles. They have been chosen because they each achieve a slightly different, yet overlapping outcome in terms of grouping people, and when looked at together, illustrate the subtle contradictions and conflicts which littered the focus group conversations. They are presented together for ease of subsequent comparison in the following paragraphs.

Extract 3

Eleanor: I guess I kind of think of, when I think of intelligent students, I think I've got two camps in my head. I think I've got one set of students that I see as being, I guess, one way that I might think about it is book smart so they're, they're the students who do really well

Author: yeah

Eleanor: academically, they've [always] done really well academically, they [they do]
Author: [yeah   ]   [yeah   ]

Eleanor: everything to the letter. They are very precise, they do all the reading, they do really well in academic tasks

Author: yes

Eleanor: But then I guess I have another set of students that I consider to be intelligent who are the ones who I think are like more creative about their thinking. So they might not necessarily be doing everything that the institution imposes on them but their thinking allows them to develop new ideas and new ways of thinking that go beyond what they are doing to tick the box to say [hhhh]

Extract 4

Jamilla: we were looking for um work placements for our students and we identified XX you know that company that makes XXX as a great place for students to do work placements and my job was to go and talk to the guy there, and er say you know, trying to sell our students and saying we've got some really excellent students yadyadaya, and they could do this that and the other and they could they've got these wonderful ideas and then on the way out he said we'll take them, but please don't send me any of those bookish ones!

[laughter]

Jamilla: and it really made me smile to [see out] there, they don't want [those ones]
Author: [yeah   ]   [no   ]

Jamilla: that are [first class necessarily]
Author: [no, exactly, yeah   ]

Jamilla: because [er. they are not necessarily going to be able to apply it   ]
Nathan: [sorry, why why are you conflating bookish with first class?]

Jamilla: [well that's what HE meant]
Author: [yeah!   ]

Jamilla: he meant [don't send] me ones that are super clever that can that can do
Nathan: [mmmmm]

Jamilla: get those [aca]demic exams remember all the information and get you know do
Nathan: [mm]

Extract 5

Judith: it's interesting, isn't it? cos, if we do, should we do that? because you know, in life we
*   need people who do get on, make things happen*

Oli: mmm

Judith: being creative is wonderful, and you know, what do they call it? Blue sky ideas?

Judith: [and]
Oli: [mm]

Judith: it's all absolutely brilliant, but in the end, we have to function, and do we actually
*   value the people who create and think of things in different ways to the brick, rather*
*   than the bricky who's really good at building the wall?*

The language tools each speaker uses are different. Eleanor is careful in her discourse to construct the 'camps' or 'sets' as a personal take on student-types; she does this through the use of 'I guess', and 'I think', 'I might think', which head many of her utterances in the first part of extract 3, and through 'in my head' as a contrast to an implicit 'out there in the world.' The order in which she introduces her types ('book smart' first, then creative) in combination with her need to state 'I consider to be intelligent' in the last section constructs the first group as more stereotypically intelligent, and the creative types as more contentiously so. In extract 4, Jamilla uses an anecdote to do the discursive work Eleanor achieved using tentative and personal phrasing. In Jamilla's story it is the protagonist, and not Jamilla, who uses the word 'bookish' to describe a category of student, which Jamilla then interprets as referring to those students who are 'super clever' and 'first class'. The voice of the protagonist also helps Jamilla to evade Nathan's criticism implicit in his line '[s]orry, why are you conflating bookish with first class?' Although Jamilla emphasises the idea is not hers with 'that's what HE meant' and 'he meant', her interpretation of 'his' words is not the only one possible. And finally, Judith, in extract 5, uses 'we' as a reference to we-as-a-human-

society to set up a collective social need for people who do not spend their time on blue sky ideas, but who get on (and build the wall). However, despite the differences in choice of language tool to justify their constructs, some of the assumptions are very similar: table 1 below outlines the author's interpretation of the assumptions inherent in these extracts. The writing with no underline shows the explicit statements of the speaker, and the underlined writing shows the mirrored inferences or assumptions based upon the explicit statements.

Table 1: Construction of student types

	Type 1 students	Type 2 students
Ext.3	'book smart' 'do really well academically' have 'always done really well academically' 'do everything to the letter' 'are very precise' 'do all the reading' 'do really well in academic tasks' are less 'creative in their thinking' are probably doing what 'he institution imposes on them' are not able to 'develop new ideas' are not able to develop 'new ways of thinking that go beyond what they are doing to tick the box'	Not 'book smart' Do not 'do really well academically' Have not 'always done really well academically' Do not 'do everything to the letter' Are not 'very precise' Do not do 'all the reading' Do not 'do really well in academic tasks' 'are more creative in their thinking' 'might not necessarily be doing what the institution imposes on them' able to 'develop new ideas' able to develop 'new ways of thinking that go beyond what they are doing to tick the box…'
Ext.4	'bookish' Not wanted by 'the guy there' Not wanted 'out there' 'first class' not able to 'apply' their knowledge 'super clever' 'get those academic exams' 'remember all the information'	Not 'bookish' Wanted by 'the guy there' wanted 'out there' Not 'first class' (second class?) Able to 'apply' their knowledge Not 'super clever' Don't 'get those academic exams' Don't 'remember all the information'
Ext.5	People who don't 'get on and make things happen' 'creative' have 'blue sky ideas' 'create and think of things in different ways to the brick' not 'really good at building the wall'	People who get on and make things happen Not 'creative' Do not have 'blue sky ideas' Do not 'create and think of things in different ways to the brick' 'the bricky who's really good at building the wall'

In each extract the characteristics are presented as given, not learnt; and the divisions are presented as neat and easy to separate. There appears to be no likelihood that one may be both bookish and creative, 'super clever' and practical, that the 'brickie' may also do blue-sky thinking. However, what is perhaps most interesting is that although type 1 in each case is implicitly recognised as the elite position, there is a particular and emphatic value placed upon the type 2 group. This is implied in Jamilla's line 'it really made me smile', in Eleanor's subtle suggestion that students in the first camp are not capable of thinking beyond the tick box, and Judith's 'but' clause: 'it's all absolutely brilliant, but in the end…' to construct societal need for the 'brickie'.

One possible interpretation is to read these discursive constructs as a subtle justification for a social system which splits the population into an elite and an underclass suited to different kinds of work (the people of gold, silver and bronze; a lie to keep order; 'one of those needful

falsehoods': Plato, 360 B.C.E., Book III). One type makes for a 'good' university student and one does not. This discourse holds that we cannot all be students of ideas, the thinkers, the learned; for most people are best suited to the grafting and the building society relies upon. Eleanor's discourse is arguably less elitist, and constructs some contempt for the 'book smart' who are presented more as well-trained monkeys, yet the division still remains.

It might be expected that aligning oneself with a categorical view of human abilities (creative v practical v bookish) might be as problematic as aligning oneself with an essentialist view of a general intelligence because it sets certain types up for certain positions in life. However, it is worth noting here that the former alignment appeared far more discursively acceptable; and served, in fact, to position the speakers as 'good' people who recognise the value of people outside of or on the edges of the academy. The ease with which 'brickie' was used synonymously with 'non-creative person who is best suited to physical labour' without challenge and without reference to issues of class and privilege was surprising given the wider emancipatory colouring of these focus group conversations. It is arguably a small step from a view that most brickies are brickies, not because fewer occupations were open to them, but because they are simply the more practical, less creative types.

Resistance and reproduction

'We put these labels on, and we move them through, and it's and it's dreadful. But…'

(Judith)

Most participants at some point in their conversation constructed the (UK) education system as unfair, particularly with regard to its assignment of grades and labels to students as a proxy for ability. However, they differed in the degree to which they constructed their own roles in the reproduction of inequalities, and in how they positioned themselves from within an unfair system. There was frequent reference to the necessity for 'playing the game' both for their students and for themselves as academics. In the following example extract 'the game' aids the construction of the 'bright hat' as an identity X needs to learn to wear, because it is this, rather than traditional intelligence, which will ensure his success.

Extract 6

Judith: [as I] say, my X year old when he was X, I knew full well, as I've been through the

Joel: [no]

Judith: game so many times that he I needed that teacher to say that he was bright, because I know it will carry on to the next year, to the next year, to the next year, to the next year, and then when he went to secondary school he'd go with his bright hat on…

Extract 7

Paula: ….people who struggle in school and struggle with A-levels tend to also then struggle in their their univer[sity course, yuh]
Author: [Oh is that right for yours?]

Paula: this was one of the reasons we increased our grade requirements, that we want some people who have some clue, it's hh horrible to say that, but that's really the motivation.

Extract 8

Nathan: we are not really given the scope to sort of take on what these days would be a three B student, it's going to be a [struggle and   ]
Jamilla: [yeah, how do you do it?]

Nathan: three Bs might be extremely good in a certain context [and I think]

Jamilla: [that's right]

Nathan: that's rather depressing, but we don't take the chance

'It's dreadful. But…'; 'it's hh horrible to say that, but…'; 'that's rather depressing, but…' position the speakers as apologists for the use of labels and grades as indicators of ability. 'We' in each of these utterances aligns the speakers with the institution: we as the educators, the gatekeepers. Nathan's construction of the 'three B student', where the B-status is an essential part of the subject produces an equivalency of grade and ability/ potential, as does in Paula's 'we want some people who have some clue', which constructs those with lower grades as clue-less. However, these voices did not dominate. Louder were those voices which constructed the reproduction of cultural privilege via essentialist ability labels as a pressing problem that was hard to challenge either because 'we…are not aware of the role we play…you get caught up in those institutional discourses' (Dylan), or because battling these problems might risk the status of the educator: 'the status quo is good for me…so it is quite difficult for me to yeah, to challenge, to break it down…' (Judith). As Ansgar Allen points out, academics are not only examiners, but they are also the examined: 'we are all impaled upon [the strictures of examination]' (Allen, 2014, p.xvi), and any resistance is therefore a risk.

In the extract below, Joel talks about the potential for grades to be considered indicative of 'intelligence', and problematizes his own role in the student grading process.

Extract 9

Joel: you know, so, the notion of [using] the mark to indicate so called ability or intelligence
Kevin: [yeah]

Joel: is is even more you know, it's going down, [it's   ]
Kevin: [or even] the suitibility for the job.

Cleo: but you are not requested to mark their intelligence when you mark a paper

Joel: it's not that, [but it gets translated into something like that, doesn't it?]
Cleo: [I mean that's not what you are trying to do   ]

Joel: [this is a] good student, this [is a]
Kevin: [mmmm]
Cleo: [well   ] a good student doesn't mean intelligence

Joel: what does it mean, then?

Cleo: [well it, urrrrrr   ] someone who who can [play the game]
Oli: [someone who can play the game]   [hm hm hm hm]

Cleo: someone who knows what he is requested to to pass [the exam, someone] who
Joel: [hhhmmm   ]

Cleo: understood probably what you told them, but doesn't mean that they're intelligent

Joel, in this extract, positions himself in opposition to the use of grades as indicators of ability of intelligence through his use of 'so called'. He is challenged by Cleo, who uses a passive form headed by a 'but' to resist Joel's claim that marks are used as a proxy for 'intelligence': 'but you are not requested to mark their intelligence when you mark a paper'; and then shifts slightly to a softer position 'I mean that's not what you are trying to do'. The latter statement allows room for a potential mismatch between a (good) lecturer intention and interpretation of grade meaning by others. Cleo's choice of a passive construct 'are not requested…' is an interesting contrast with her active 'not what you are trying to do': the former constructs the lecturer as bound within a hierarchical structure in which they are servants of the system; and the latter constructs the lecturer as the agent with a respectable intention (see also Raaper, 2016, p.187). Whilst Joel, with the support of Kevin, constructs a semantic train of synonyms with 'the mark', 'intelligence' and 'a good student', Cleo denies the construction of intelligence via the mark, instead co-constructing (with Oli) the 'good student' as the one 'who can play the game'. The assumption in this discourse is that the mark as an indicator of the degree to which they can play the game is more defensible, than using the mark as proxy for 'intelligence'. This position is interesting if only because there is a well-established recognition that people do not 'play the game' from equal positions; that the game is rigged from the start (Bourdieu, 1986; Bathmaker et al. 2013). Those students who know 'the game' better understand that their mark is a kind of payment for doing what they have been told to do in the way they have been told to do it: 'the teacher gives back a mark – a kind of surrogate wage' (Wrigley et al. 2012, p.98). This exchange is a good-fit for a neoliberal model of education (Raaper, 2016); that is, it reinforces the provision of education by those who know to those who don't according to market logic, whilst sweeping any difficult issues of 'fairness' into the private domain.

In the extract below, Dylan and Sammy talk about resisting the academic hierarchy which they construct as unfair, both for students, and for academics.

Extract 10

Dylan: but but, what happens is custom and practice is handed on, and
*   you [know   ]*
Paula: [but there] would be certain [situations that   ] yeah.
Dylan: [the systems are perpetuated]

Paula: it is.

Sammy: and it's also interesting, isn't it, thinking about ways of rebelling, [so] so
Dylan: [mm]

Sammy: so ways which you can be non-academic in an academic context [and I]
Dylan: [mmm]

Sammy: suppose I get myself in trouble sometimes because, like, it's it's, I can't say
*   Pierre Bourdieu because of my accent, [I just can't]*
Author: [haaha   ]

Sammy: [I just can't hh say the name]

[laughter]

Sammy: [I'm so bad, it's really interesting]
all: [hahahaha   ]

Sammy: Bourdieu hahahaha [hahahaha]

[laughter]

Sammy: all of that, kind of, character you kind of bring. Sometimes I've got notepads
*   with silly cartoon characters in them and I wear nail varnish which is chipped and*
*   sparkly, and I have like pencil cases which are really scruffy, and I do that, I've*
*   evolved to do that, explicitly, as an act of reb[ellion]*
Author: [that's] really interesting

Sammy: [in certain] contexts, but that does mean you are famous, because then
Author: [yeah   ]
Dylan: [mmm   ]

Sammy: people think I'm doing it because of something [else, but] I'm, doing it
Dylan: [right   ]

Sammy: just to fluster them, haha in a small act of tiny rebellion [hahaha]
Dylan: [no, no]

[laughter]

Sammy:[hahaha] but they think that I'm therefore acting non-academic and a little bit
*   unprofessional, but I kind of want to do little things all the time because I want to say*
*   'stop it' it doesn't make you better than me, hahahaha*

Dylan: mmm

Sammy: in this context

In the extract above, Sammy constructs being 'non-academic' as achievable through performing certain kinds of behaviour; with an associated assumption that being 'academic' is also achievable via contrasting kinds of behaviour. Elsewhere in the conversations, being 'academic' was constructed as a descriptor of someone who demonstrated a particular set of abilities, or who was intelligent in particular ways. However, here there is a shift onto the presentation of oneself within an academic context. Sammy positions herself both as someone who does not quite fit into academia by not being able to pronounce 'Bourdieu', and also as someone who does not *want* to fit completely into academia. Sammy's accent is not constructed as a choice, but her 'small tiny act of rebellion' is. In Sammy's story of wearing chipped and sparkly nail varnish, scruffiness, and notepads with silly cartoon characters she positions herself explicitly as a rebel railing against the perpetuation of 'custom and practice' that Dylan implicitly decries at the beginning of this extract. However, there is a sense of hopelessness here, as she supposes her acts are not recognised as anti-hierarchical, anti-elitist (the assumption behind her first use of 'non-academic'), but as 'unprofessional' and 'non-academic' (this time with an assumption that 'non-academic' means someone who does not really 'get it'). Sammy is not able to say 'stop it, it doesn't make you better than me', and her behaviours which she uses to do the work of these words are not apparently interpreted in the way she hopes. Her resistance is also gendered, which may or may not be a conscious reaction to the patriarchal discourses which govern behaviour in academia (Katila et al. 2002); but either way, it is a challenge both to the institution and to Sammy's own 'academic' identity because of an implicit association between 'sparkly' things and chipped nail varnish, and being 'girly' in a way that might be seen as insufficiently academic and serious.

Lecturing staff are to a large degree bound by the assessment practices they inherit in their institutions. They are usually bound to assess students through the use of grades and degree classifications, which carry cultural value and help to build financial capital beyond university. How far and how much individual academics can resist the cultural, social and financial reproduction of capital when they are so bound is an important question (discussed in detail in Hardy & Maguire, 2008). Some of the participants in these discussions constructed themselves as active and successful agents of resistance, working within the academy to deconstruct assumptions of ability and worth (akin to Meyerson & Scully's 'tempered radicals', 1995), some were more resigned to the limits of individual resistance, and others positioned themselves more frequently as supportive of academic elitism and a supposed meritocracy.

Conclusion

This study attended to the talk around 'academic intelligence' and the 'good' student in three conversations between groups of academics. It considered the ideological voice(s) speaking through the words of the academics as they (re)produced, and positioned themselves in relation to particular discourses. The ways in which the discursive 'choices' in the conversations indicated different degrees of discomfort with different constructions of

intelligence and with the speakers' own positions in the systemic reproduction of potentially unjust practices were of most interest.

Discomfort with the concept of a fixed and innate (academic) intelligence was not an easy mesh with an acknowledgement of the ways in which the academics' own practice reproduced inequalities in a system historically shaped by such a concept. This discomfort also appeared to help shift the conversation away from traditional constructs of 'intelligence' and towards discursive construction of the 'good' student, and to difficulties with teaching and assessment practice. Research attending more specifically to the discourse and positioning around inclusive teaching and assessment in higher education would be a useful addition to the current work.

Ranciere (1987/1991) makes a bold suggestion which is fitting with the discussion in this study: we need 'a confidence in the intellectual capacity of any human being' (p.14) with the recognition that 'our problem isn't proving that all intelligence is equal. It's seeing what can be done under that supposition' (p.46). In the context of this study, Ranciere's words might be used to warn higher education institutions and encourage the academics working within them to move away from an emphasis upon measuring abilities, and ranking academic and, by association, moral worth. If educators can begin with the assumption of 'intelligence' as constructed in the broadest possible manner, and adjust their teaching, assessment and gatekeeping practices, and their talk, accordingly, some space can be made for a more just higher education environment (though some might argue this is fruitless without the 'dismantling of everything else' Allen, 2014, p.21). Research is needed to better understand how academics can and do resist power dynamics from within the academy (Raaper, 2012, p.183), but the position in this paper is that discomfort, as seemingly felt by the participants in this study, is a potential springboard for action. Hardy and Maguire (2008) write 'actors do not "have" power; instead they occupy (or fail to occupy) subject positions that allow them to exercise power in – and on – a particular field.' (p.201). Asking how we, as educators and academics, position ourselves in relation to the many possible discourses which shape educational practice, and how we might 'imagine otherwise' (Giroux, 2003, p. 477), is an essential starting point; but it is not enough. There is a danger that simply tinkering with curricula and 'inclusive' teaching practice will enable educators to extricate themselves from a feeling of complicity in elitist social reproduction, whilst the basic structure remains unshaken. Shaking the structure calls for an explicit institutional acknowledgement of the deceits of meritocracy and elitism (Goldthorpe, 1997) and a critical unpacking of how 'intelligence' comes into being. Dorling (2015: 87) writes '[t]o believe that your children are in the top fifth requires first, to believe that there is a top fifth.' Dismantling the convenient-for-some belief in the 'natural' existence of a 'top fifth' might assist in this structural shaking.

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