

**Restructuring of Education, Youth, and Citizenship:  
an Ethnographic Study of Private Higher Education  
in Contemporary Singapore**

Yi'En Cheng  
(M.Soc.Sci., NUS)

School of Geography and the Environment  
St Peter's College  
University of Oxford



Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Geography and the Environment

Trinity 2015

## **Abstract**

In spite of widespread critiques about the neoliberalisation of higher education and its production of citizenship in relation to the market, transformation of students into profit-maximising individuals, and the vitalisation of a self-enterprising subjectivity, many of these claims remain under-examined with respect to cultural production. The objective of this research is to explore the neoliberal production of middle-class citizenship through the lens of educated non-elite local youth in Singapore. By combining geographical, sociological and anthropological insights about education and youth, I develop a theoretically informed ethnographic case study to examine how this segment of young people reproduce themselves as middle-class citizens. The research is based on eleven months of fieldwork at a local private institute of higher education, where I hanged around, talked to, and observed Singaporean young people between ages 18 and 25 studying for their first degree.

The ethnographic materials are written up into four substantive papers, demonstrating the ways in which educated non-elite Singaporean youth in private higher education engage with state disseminated ideas around neoliberal accumulation and human capital formation. I argue that these students draw on class-based sensibilities and feelings to produce vibrant forms of normativities, subjectivities, and politics that pose a challenge to dominant assumptions of a “hollowed out” citizenship under neoliberalism. The research makes two overall interventions in geographic and social scientific writings about neoliberal restructuring of higher education and its implications for youth citizenship. First, it cautions against a straightforward claim that neoliberal technologies of control have extended market values into citizenship subjectivity and, with it, the erosion of progressive political projects. Second, it provides a much-needed analysis of middle-class citizenship formation among young people caught at the losing end of a diversifying educational landscape.

## Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information that have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.



---

Yi'En Cheng

Date:

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, **Professor Craig Jeffrey** who is now at the Australia India Institute, Melbourne, for his critical insights and guidance throughout the course of the study. I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to **Associate Professor Johanna Waters**, who came on board as co-supervisor in 2014 and brought fresh ideas to my research. The completion of my thesis would not have been possible without the patience, astuteness, and immense knowledge from these two excellent academic mentors.

I would also like to thank **Dr David Mills** and **Professor Linda McDowell** for serving on the Transfer of Status examination, and David and **Professor Deborah Phillips** for the Confirmation of Status examination. Their feedback has helped to sharpen the focus and arguments of my research.

It must be mentioned that two articles – Chapter 4 and 5 – have benefitted from critical comments provided by scholars who have remained anonymous under the peer-review process. Their comments have challenged me to refine my theoretical perspectives and writing focus.

I thank my fellow peers at the **Global Youth Reading Group** for numerous stimulating discussions at the Kendrew Quadrangle Building. I truly enjoyed the intellectual camaraderie.

The doctoral study has been made possible with the funding support from **the Oxford University Clarendon Scholarship** and **St Peter's College Diggle Fund**. I am ever so grateful to those who have supported my application in one way or another. A special mention is due for **Professor Brenda Yeoh**, **Associate Professor Shirlena Huang**, and **Associate Professor Tracey Skelton** at the National University of Singapore, who acted as my academic referees on many occasions.

I extend my thanks to faculty and staff members at the **School of Geography and the Environment** and **St Peter's College** for their help and support in the past three years. I also do not forget the continuing encouragement from faculty members at the **Department of Geography, National University of Singapore**, where I first began my journey as a geographer.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank my family and friends, who have been the pillars of support in my academic pursuit.

Lastly, this ethnographic research rests fundamentally on the practical assistance from and numerous dialogues with students I encountered during fieldwork. I sincerely thank them for their time and willingness to help. I also thank the programme director for granting access to conduct fieldwork at the institute.

## Table of Contents

	Page
<b>Abstract</b> .....	i
<b>Declaration</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iv
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	
Preamble .....	1
Research objective and questions .....	2
Overall argument .....	3
Thesis layout .....	3
<b>Chapter 2 Survey of Literature</b>	
Introduction .....	5
Globalising higher education and restructuring of citizenship .....	5
Higher education and youth citizenship .....	6
Neoliberalism and ethnographic insights .....	10
Reproduction, culture, and shifting politics of human as capital .....	14
Cultural production and human capital formation .....	16
Different subjects, different values .....	20
Young people's spatialities: new normativities, subjectivities, and politics .....	24
New normativities .....	25
New subjectivities .....	28
New politics .....	31
Ethnography and geographies of higher education and youth .....	34
Conclusion .....	39
Notes .....	40
References .....	41
<b>Chapter 3 Design and Methodology</b>	
Introduction .....	53
Ethnographic case .....	53
The Singaporean context .....	54

Fieldwork locus .....	63
Sampling of students .....	69
Navigating the “field” .....	70
Methods in practice .....	71
Classed relations and personal disclosure .....	79
“Friendships”, reciprocities, and dilemmas .....	83
Analysis and representation .....	88
Notes and transcripts .....	88
Analysing and writing .....	91
Conclusion .....	94
Notes .....	95
References .....	96

#### **Chapter 4 Biopolitical Geographies of Student Life: private Higher**

##### **Education and Citizenship Life-making in Singapore**

Introduction .....	102
Biopolitical geographies, social reproduction, and citizenship .....	104
Biopolitics in Singapore: life-making through education .....	108
Case study and methods .....	111
Biopolitics in the “mainstream”: becoming viable citizens .....	114
Respectable masculinity .....	116
Respectable femininity .....	119
Student performances of “alternative” biopolitics .....	122
Critical evaluations .....	122
Inventing hope .....	125
Modest activism .....	127
Conclusions .....	129
Notes .....	132
References .....	132

#### **Chapter 5 Learning in Neoliberal Times: Private Degree Students and the Politics of Value (Trans)coding in Singapore**

Introduction .....	137
Education, human capital, and the politics of value (trans)coding .....	139
Education and self-activated “learning citizen” .....	143

Ethnographic locus of research .....	146
Value-coding the “employable” subject .....	149
Value-coding the “bookworm” and the “skiver” .....	154
Conclusion .....	159
Notes .....	161
References .....	161

**Chapter 6 Critical Geographies of Education Beyond “Value”: Moral Sentiments, Caring, and a Politics for Acting Differently**

Introduction .....	165
Locating normativity: moral sentiments and care .....	167
Research context .....	172
Three accounts of implicit normativity and practices of care .....	174
Class reflexivity and deconstructive empathy .....	174
Learning through islands of solidarities .....	178
Self-care and intergenerational love .....	181
Conclusions .....	184
Note .....	187
References .....	187

**Chapter 7 Educated Non-elites and Locally Enacted Cosmopolitanisms: Private Degree Students in Globalising Singapore**

Introduction .....	194
Unpacking cosmopolitanism in globalising education .....	196
Globalising higher education in “Cosmopolis” Singapore .....	199
Student performances of cosmopolitanism .....	203
Rooted cosmopolitanism: negotiating working aspirations .....	204
Cosmopolitan learnings: strategic identities and fragmented openness .....	208
“Unanticipated” cosmopolitan sensibilities .....	214
Conclusions .....	217
Note .....	219
References .....	219

**Chapter 8 Conclusion**

Preamble .....	224
----------------	-----

Synthesis: reading across countercurrents .....	225
Reproducing middle-class citizenship: educated non-elite strategies .....	226
Neoliberal youth agency: individualised or social? .....	229
Learning and cultural production: reproductive or progressive? .....	232
Contributions of research .....	235
Limitations and potentials .....	237
Concluding statement .....	238
References .....	239

# Introduction

## Preamble

One day in August 2013, I was leaving Singapore Private Institute after an informal group interview to a bus stop right outside of the campus. Walking beside me was Aaron, a third year student in his twenties whom I had just met. He asked, “So you were from NUS?” I nodded and smiled. “I have many friends there, I’m the only one in the clique who did not make it there,” he continued. We stood a distance away from the crowded bus stop, beside a rubbish bin, where we had a frontal view of the campus. He lit a cigarette, took a puff, and pointed to the polytechnic located adjacent to the institute. “See how small our bloody school is, even smaller than the poly over there,” he said in a slightly amused tone, followed by a sigh. Earlier on, we were in a conversation with some of his classmates about their experiences of studying for a degree at the private institute. The one-hour chat had passed by quickly with students talking energetically about why they felt a degree was so important in Singapore, alongside frequent indignant remarks about the Singaporean education system and general stereotypes about private degree education.

Like his peers, Aaron’s performance at the GCE A Level examinations was unable to secure him a preferred spot at a local public university. Taking up a course at the private institute was not really a choice for him, but “a way of getting around the system” – a phrase used by Aaron during the conversation. Aaron took another puff and said, “maybe the society see us as people who cannot make it into proper universities, but to me, it all boils down to whether we can prove ourselves.” Just then, his bus arrived. Aaron took one last puff at his cigarette, flicked it into the ashtray on the rubbish bin, waved to me, and made a dash for the bus.

Between 2013 and 2014, I conducted ethnographic research in the city-state of Singapore, hanging around, talking to, and observing students at a local private educational institute. The eleven months of fieldwork at Singapore Private Institute has provided numerous accounts of young people for whom the burgeoning private higher education landscape in the last decade represented a fresh opportunity for them to pursue degree education locally. Their experiences and lives as middle-class citizens are complicated by an educational status that produces them as a separately constituted segment of educated youth in the city-state. But even as scholarship on higher education and youth citizenship has gained traction in recent years, very little attention is on young people like Aaron who are caught in this position within rapid educational and economic change.

### **Research objective and questions**

The objective of this research is to explore the neoliberal production of middle-class citizenship through the lens of educated non-elite local youth in Singapore. By combining geographical, sociological and anthropological insights about education and youth, I develop a theoretically informed ethnographic case study to examine how this segment of young people are constituted and reconstituting themselves as citizen-subjects. The analytic locus is on Singaporean young people between ages 18 and 25 studying for their first degree at a local institute of private higher education. Drawing on research materials collected with these students, I seek to answer the following questions:

1. How are educated non-elite youth using neoliberal discourses to reproduce themselves as middle-class gendered citizens? To what extent are these discourses reproduced in a manner that endorses dominant state pedagogies?

2. To what extent has neoliberal economic restructuring precipitated among students in higher education an ethos of competitive individualism on the one hand, and inhibited social actions and interdependencies on the other hand?

3. Do students engage with learning practices that are counterintuitive to dominant cultures of accumulation and human capital formation? To what extent can students' learning practices be considered progressive or reproductive?

### **Overall argument**

I argue that educated non-elite Singaporean youth in private higher education enrol state disseminated ideas around neoliberal accumulation and human capital formation to reproduce themselves as middle-class citizens. However, they do so in a manner that involves cultural inventions, including class-based sensibilities and feelings, through situated practices of evaluation and moral reasoning. In the process, these young people produce vibrant forms of normativities, subjectivities, and politics that pose a challenge to dominant assumptions of a “hollowed out” citizenship under neoliberalism.

### **Thesis layout**

My thesis is organised into a total of eight chapters. In this introductory chapter, I have outlined the research objective, questions, and overall argument. In Chapter 2, I survey selected literature to address key debates and gaps in existing research on contemporary political economy of higher educational restructuring and youth.

Chapter 3 provides an account of my research design and methodology. The section on the Singaporean context is a revised version of a forthcoming piece in contribution to the

Springer Major Reference Works series on *Geographies of Children and Young People* (editor-in-chief: Tracey Skelton).

The next four chapters represent the papers that have been submitted to peer-reviewed journals for publication. The current status of the papers are as follows: Chapter 4 – published at *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*; Chapter 5 – revised and resubmitted to *Environment and Planning A*; Chapter 6 – under review at *Antipode*; Chapter 7 – under review at *Geoforum*.

Chapter 8 concludes my study by answering the three research questions and outlining key contributions, limitations, and potentials of my ethnographic case study.

The thesis is framed and submitted under the “published papers route” in accordance to the requirements set by the School of Geography, Oxford University. Under this route, at least four papers of publishable quality must be submitted to peer-reviewed journals, which must be accompanied by an introduction, literature review, and conclusion. Additionally, the papers must be sufficiently coherent and comprehensive to meet the standards of doctoral examination.

# Survey of Literature

## Introduction

Geographical scholarship on educational restructuring provides important lessons for understanding contemporary state regimes and young people's lives in the face of neoliberal globalisation (Thiem 2008; Holloway et al. 2010). In recent years, geographers have shown considerable interest in the topic of higher educational restructuring with a focus on, for instance, globalising tertiary education (Olds 2007), international student mobility (Waters 2006; Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014), and micro-geographies of student lives (Holton and Riley 2013). This survey of literature offers an evaluation of geographical writings on higher educational restructuring in relation to broader social science literature to outline issues around political economy of higher education – namely neoliberalisation, social reproduction, and citizenship formation – that require further critical examination. First, I consider how contemporary restructuring of higher education is altering the role of young people and critical concerns around youth citizenship. Second, I demonstrate the complex and unequal production of citizenship in and through education by referring to writings on the politics of social and cultural reproduction and human capital formation. This is followed by a discussion of how recent geographical writings on young people can provide an extended theoretical basis for analysing geographies of higher education and youth. The fourth section blends insights raised across these discussions into an ethnographically sensitive approach to study the political economy of higher education.

## Globalising higher education and restructuring of citizenship

There is now a new level of geographical interest in the relationship between education, state, and citizenship formation in the contemporary globalising and neoliberal moment (Mitchell 2006; Pykett 2010; Gagen 2013). While questions around global and neoliberal reconfigurations of citizenship are relatively new, scholars such as Durkheim (1956) and

Althusser (1971) have long argued that formal education is a crucial site for understanding state transmission of social messages and cultural values. The central argument was that education and schooling has served as an ideological tool of the state to discipline individuals of the modern, capitalist nation-state. This idea has become pivotal to a rich tradition of sociological and anthropological studies on the shifting dynamics between educational systems, state-society relations, and economic organisation. In recent years, geographical writings about the changing spatial relationships of states to global economic regimes have pointed to a profound rescaling of both education and citizenship tied to flexible systems of accumulation (Mitchell 2003; Waters and Brooks 2011; also see Ong 2006). In particular, Mitchell (2003) wrote that national citizens are now educated within state regimes that must respond to new social, political, and economic pressures from inside and outside the national scale. The process of citizenship production within this political economy of state formation and education, therefore, is no longer bound to the “nation” but simultaneously being reinvented at the trans-national scale in order to meet the demands of a new global economy.

### ***Higher education and youth citizenship***

Higher education is an especially productive site to engage with questions around citizenship formation in the twenty-first century. Universities, colleges, and other kinds of higher educational (or tertiary) institutes are increasingly enrolled into dominant projects of economic development and globalisation, by taking on the task of producing knowledgeable, skilful and entrepreneurial graduates. Given this heightened role in the cultivation of a range of new citizen-subjects, higher education across many parts of the world plays a crucial role in shaping citizenship (Olds 2007; Brown and Tannock 2009; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2008). The landscape of higher education itself has also undergone significant transformations over the last two decades, with an unprecedented rise in education-related

mobilities that are reconfiguring the provision and consumption of education across local, regional, and global scales (Waters and Brooks 2011). For instance, cross-border education in the form of university partnerships, offshore and satellite campuses, online distance-learning, and overseas study programmes is now a key strategy of internationalisation (Naidoo 2008). As many scholars have pointed out, these spatial re-arrangements within higher education are driven by new political-economic rationalities that promote (quasi) marketisation, privatisation, and public-private partnerships (Ball 2009; Bjarnason et al. 2009; Mok 2009). These recent restructuring processes are prompting new concerns around the changing function of higher education and its implications for citizenship formation.

Scholars are now arguing that recent policy changes are transforming education into commodities to be traded in the marketplace, educational institutions into corporate training grounds, and students into calculative, depoliticised consumers (Shumar 1997; Peters 2001; Gerrard 2014). New educational priorities driven by an increasingly laissez-faire global economy, as these critics argue, are leading to the erosion of democratic and multicultural forms of citizenship (Mitchell 2003; Giroux 2003). This has led scholars such as Giroux (2003, 157) to maintain an urgency to reclaim higher education as “a democratic public sphere”, a space to engage “questions of justice, social freedom, and the capacity for democratic agency, action, and change”. To be sure, many of these concerns reflect the enduring role of higher education in western civilisations, and more specifically that of public universities, in upholding the vision of a democratic public citizenship. Wright Mills (1963), for instance, called for higher education as a bulwark against capitalist values and committed to forging a citizenship based on democratic values, civic engagement, and public wisdom. However, similar observations on higher educational reforms aimed at nurturing creative, entrepreneurial, and flexibly skilled citizens who are capable of competing in the global war for talent, have also been made in non-western contexts, such

as those in East and Southeast Asia (Mok 2003; Ong 2006; Marginson 2010; Ng 2011). Therefore, assumptions about how young people are being fashioned into a particular type of neoliberal market citizen – the politically apathetic *homo economicus*, who thinks and acts on the basis of flexible self-accrual – are also important for investigating higher educational settings outside western liberal societies.

Contemporary state mobilisations of higher education to invest in human capital for boosting national competitiveness are also enmeshed within a global circulation of discourses around young people. As Ruddick (2003: 335) wrote, “modern notions of “youth” and “childhood” are being broadly reframed in relation to a new political geography of nations”, which both respond to and help shape the emergence of a new globalised modernity – one that privileges particular embodiments of the modern and viable educated citizen. Among other insights, Ruddick (2003) raised three critical observations that make clear how idealised constructions of youth and childhood mediate and inform specific agendas around globalisation. First, modern concepts of youth and childhood are underpinned by an idea of adulthood based on the achievement of social and economic independence required to sustain western industrial capitalism, which serve to (re)produce a citizenship based on participation in paid work (see also Gifford, Mycock, and Murakami 2014). Second, formal education has become central to governments and international organisations such as the World Bank in their visions to “protect” young people on the one hand, and to promote equitable growth on the other hand. Third, the culture of youthfulness itself is now a new cultural capital, especially in the face of rising under/un-employment and new ideas around continuing education and training, which is required for citizens to adapt to uncertain career pathways and life transitions. Over the last decade, there has also been an intensification of discourses around youth empowerment encouraging young people to develop civic competence so that they can become active stakeholders, or so-called

planetary citizens (Haigh 2008), in the new global order (Arnot and Swartz 2012) - an emphasis in which some scholars have argued intersect with neoliberal agendas (see Sukarieh and Tannock 2014).

Placing young people at the centre of these issues surrounding recent transformations of higher education raises some new questions about youth citizenship (but also see Mills 2013; 2015 for the importance of historical perspectives). To what extent does contemporary restructuring of higher education to promote economic globalisation run into conflict with its democratic and social aims? Do current developments encourage young people to cultivate an ethos based on competition and individualism, inhibit collective commitments and social participation, and promote a form of marketised citizenship among contemporary youth? What kinds of citizen-subjects are being fostered and valorised at the expense of others; and what alternative constructions of citizenship to that of dominant state projects might emerge under these new pressures? Much of the discussion around these questions refers, implicitly or explicitly, to processes of marketisation and privatisation as a catalyst for the emergence of a “hollowed out” citizen-subject. But how these processes are negotiated by different groups of young people and students within specific educational contexts has rarely been investigated. As Ahier, Beck, and Moore (2003) demonstrate in their study of students in British higher education, young people do not perform themselves as citizen-subjects in the image of a single citizenship model, whether it is based on ideals of neoliberalism or social democracy. Moreover, geographers have maintained that articulations of citizenships “are a result of the manner in which definitions of the rights, obligations and membership requirements of citizenship, as well as the discursive and embodied practices of citizenship, emerge in different times and spaces structured by complex conditions” (Dickinson et al. 2008, 102; see also Staeheli et al. 2012). Hence, the question of how students choose and use higher education, and the implications that has for

the ways they imagine, feel about, and practise citizenship, is a matter for careful empirical research.

Focusing the analytic lens on youth, and in particular their everyday experiences of globalising and neoliberalising higher education, not only enables a nuanced picture of how young people's citizenships are made within the contents of everyday life. It also posits young people as producers of a "critical gaze" that has the potential to shed light on a range of contemporary youth issues, including but not limited to, the undermining of young people's efforts to access resources associated with acceptable forms of "adulthood" due to state withdrawal of welfare provision since the 1980s in many parts of the world; the increasing need for young people to assume responsibility for social reproduction in the face of economic and labour market restructuring; and the persistence of class as a salient division that structures young people's experiences of education and transition to work (see Jeffrey and McDowell 2004; Jeffrey 2010a). Given that many of these issues coincide with the rise and spread of neoliberal agendas in both western and non-western contexts, young people's experiences should also be of interest to geographers and their efforts to theorise neoliberalism (Larner 2000; Castree 2006; Peck and Theodore 2012; see also Thiem 2008).

### *Neoliberalism and ethnographic insights*

It is now widely argued that young people in many parts of the world, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, enter tertiary or higher education to intensify their search for cultural capital in order to secure a competitive edge in labour markets. This is in the form of institutional capital such as credentials (Waters and Leung 2014), or extra-curricular activities and internships (Liu 2008; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). They can also be in the form of embodied capital such as linguistic skills (Park and Abelmann 2004) and "overseas experience" (Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Yoon 2014). In addition

to accumulating these capitals, students are fashioning their own identities through neoliberal discourses, such as that of individualism, flexibility, self-enterprise, and adaptability, to activate themselves as particular versions of state-vaunted “successful” worker-consumer citizens (Davidson 2008; Liu 2008; Burke 2011; Allen et al. 2013). Urciuoli (2010, 215) added that, apart from state disseminated discourses, educational institutions are also actively involved in enrolling students into thinking of themselves as “bundles of skills” to be traded in the labour market. These empirical findings reflect wider critiques about higher educational institutions as a vital social field in which neoliberal technologies operate, by encouraging citizens to “seek introspection, self-mastery, and personal fulfillment” in the marketplace, as well as to embrace the idea that “capital accumulation is not an end in itself, but a means of reinvention” (Freeman 2011, 356). But many of these writings also show that even as neoliberal discourses appear to have promoted a new ethos of human capital formation, their penetrations are nevertheless partial.

In Hoffman’s (2006) ethnographic study of college students in late-socialist China, she observed that recent graduates and young professionals’ narratives around working abroad, establishing a career in foreign companies, and obtaining “overseas” credentials were embedded in expressions of loyalties to China as the “motherland”. Her research demonstrates how Chinese youth cultivate themselves into patriotic professionals through a combination of ideas around neoliberal autonomous choice-making and filial nationalism. While Hoffman (2006, 564) tends to see these two regimes as “being incorporated into a single subject position, without great personal turmoil”, others such as Liu (2008, 209) argue that it is “capitalist values, instead of socialist-collectivist norms, [that] hold much greater appeal for Chinese young people today”. Whether young people are co-opting neoliberal rationalities over socialist values, or vice-versa, remains a question for sustained examination. But the point that young people do not passively absorb neoliberal discourses

is an important argument forwarded in many ethnographic writings on education and youth. For instance, Jeffrey's (2010) work with educated middle-class young men in north India documented the manner in which youth are engaged in protests against commercialisation and corruption, but at the same time profit from the neoliberalisation of higher education through their role as educational brokers. What is particularly striking about this observation is the contradictory manner in which young people are working with and against neoliberalism, rather than a straightforward categorisation of youth practices as "neoliberal/capitalist" versus "anti-neoliberal/anti-capitalist". In her study on young people enrolled in vocational education as a structural effect of China's neoliberal regime, Woronov (2011) showed the emergence of a new class of urban youth who built pathways that did not follow the state promoted discourse of individual development. Instead, they produced a different value system around their educational and consumption practices, prided themselves as the real cosmopolitan urbanites as compared to "intellectually superior" university students, and built a moral argument that defended their educational choices as "filial children" rather than "educational failures". Additionally, the use of "neoliberalism as a holistic context of contemporary human action" often dismisses notions of self-development and self-cultivation that preceded neoliberalisation (Kipnis 2007, 395).<sup>1</sup>

These ethnographically informed analyses of youth narratives and practices provide valuable and subtle insights into the variegated nature of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has been variously understood as a set of policy programs, as a hegemonic ideology, and as governmentality (Larner 2000). Within scholarship on geographies of education and young people, conceptual deployments of neoliberalism have mostly drawn on either a neo-Marxist or a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, or a combination of both (Davidson 2008; Pykett 2010; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; 2012; Cairns 2013). While the

former reading of neoliberalism explicitly links contemporary marketisation and privatisation of educational policies to the broader workings of capital through ideological reinforcements, an interpretation of neoliberalism as governmentality is more concerned with those sites and techniques through which individuals become self-governing subjects (Larner 2009). Writings about young people in different educational sites and regimes draw attention to a more fine-grained understanding of neoliberalism as multiplex and contested, by emphasizing the manner in which youth are both neoliberal subjects *and* actors: they invest in their own social reproduction through acts of “pushing away” from while being “pulled back” into neoliberal state and educational regimes. On the one hand, neoliberal projects “from above” touch down into the everyday life of different people at different places in conversation with existing state disciplinary regimes, cultural logics, and subject positions (Castree 2006; England and Ward 2007; Ong 2007). There is never a singular narrative of neoliberalism, but only multiple neoliberal logics that always emerge from “on-the-ground” social relations, thereby generating subjectivities that are relational and interactive (Kipnis 2011). On the other hand, neoliberal projects “from below”, specifically those articulated by young people themselves, are shaped by diverse rationalities and strategies that may or may not revolve around neoliberalism. Even when young people reproduce neoliberal discourses, they do not always cohere with or support state-endorsed visions of neoliberalism (Jeffrey 2011).

If neoliberal reforms have involved the creation of new educational arrangements through privatisation, then it is also important to acknowledge the diversification imbricated within processes of globalisation and neoliberalisation (Kraftl 2015). As new educational markets emerge, young people have to navigate a more complex and differentiated higher educational landscape, which involve changing economies of student worth, hierarchies of educational capital, configuration of im/mobilities, as well as flows of knowledges (Waters

2006; Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014). With the exception of a few studies, there has been very little critical attention on higher education spaces outside the focus on (elite) universities (see Hall and Appleyard 2011; Waters and Leung 2014). Additionally, if we accept the arguments about neoliberalism as mutable and decentered, rather than an “overarching context” (Kipnis 2007, 395) within which discourses and subjects are produced, then any straightforward assumption about neoliberalisation of higher education and youth citizenship needs to be more carefully considered. In particular, much of the literature spanning across schooling, higher education, and international student migration has tended to portray young people as students who fashion themselves in and/or against the image of a neoliberal citizen-subject, one who is forward-looking, calculative, and strategic. The archetypal image of this is perhaps best represented by the figure of the highly educated “strategic cosmopolitan [who] serves as a nodal agent in the expanding networks of the global economy” and the “superior footsoldier of global capitalism” (Mitchell 2003, 400). But beyond this self-activated and future-oriented person forged within middle-class and elitist norms, what other citizen-subjects exist? What material conditions and vectors of power do they inhabit? How might these differently constituted citizen-subjects engage with neoliberal discourses in ways that confound the image of the calculative and strategic competitor in education? The next section picks up some of these questions through a discussion of selected works on social and cultural reproduction of class in education.

### **Reproduction, culture, and shifting politics of human as capital**

Higher educational institutions do not produce citizenship and subjects in a straightforward manner and on equal grounds. It is now widely acknowledged in critical educational research that higher education has an enduring role in reproducing middle-class citizenship. Education is a key social field in which individuals can compete for status, and hence acquiring upward social mobility, by obtaining desired institutional cultural capital in the

form of credentials (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Middle-class parents employ a range of strategies to ensure their children get into “good” schools, acquire the necessary cultural and linguistic capital to advance into “elite” universities, and eventually graduate with a university qualification that enables them to access high-status and high-paying professions. Therefore, class is a form of cultural status constituted by educational levels, family resources, and distinctive sets of lifestyles in addition to economic capital. Bourdieu’s theorisation of education as a social field in which cultural capital is struggled over continues to lend critical insights into contemporary class analyses. Within geography, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural and social capital has been widely used by scholars to foreground the manner in which middle-class youth and families pursue education as a vital strategy for social reproduction (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2005; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Waters and Leung 2014).<sup>2</sup> Apart from demonstrating how the privileged classes maintain power and resources, these studies also point to the different ways class strategies perpetuate inequalities and exclusions across subnational, national, and transnational contexts. But young people’s use of cultural capital as a means for class reproduction also needs to account for gendered processes. To this end, Holloway, O’Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson (2012) have demonstrated how young men and women must negotiate different gendered roles and responsibilities in order to realise their cultural capital gained from pursuing overseas education.

Although geographical scholarship on middle-class reproduction have benefitted from Bourdieu’s theorisation of cultural capital, analyses have not sufficiently accounted for the inventive dimension of cultural reproduction. Scholars writing from the cultural studies tradition have long emphasised the manner in which students draw on diverse cultural resources, including class-based loyalties, as a form of struggle against hegemonic power. Willis’s (1977) *Learning to Labour* exemplifies this “cultural class” critique of schooling

by demonstrating how white working-class young lads develop cultural practices, such as playing truancy and talking back to teachers, as a form of oppositional culture against the dominant middle-class school environment. Ironically, this very process of creating a counterculture serves to reinforce their working-class identity and position as these lads went on to take up working-class jobs. Writing from a feminist perspective, Weis's (1990) ethnography of students in a working-class suburb of Buffalo, New York documented how new discourses emerging from feminist and anti-racist movements during the 1980s fuelled girls' aspirations for education, upward social mobility, and independence. Her study also pointed to how boys resisted schoolwork and teacher authority as a way to express their unhappiness about the eroding "male privilege", pointing to how a schooling counterculture emerges from struggles over gender/race as much as class. Concepts such as counter-hegemony, resistance, and agency took on great significance for these scholars as they refuse to see educational institutions as a "black box" for class and other inequalities to be reproduced. To some extent, geographers have also made substantial contributions to this sort of cultural analysis by attending to how power relations around, for instance, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and religion, are contested (Skelton and Valentine 2002; Burgess and Wilson 2005; Holt 2007; Johnston, Wilson and Burgess 2008; Hollingworth and Archer 2010). The attention to cultural formations and politics not only heightened critical awareness of the complex range of identities, differences, and practices involved in social reproduction, but also reframed educational institutions as sites of negotiation and contestation. Nevertheless, these studies are largely focused on schooling spaces.

### ***Cultural production and human capital formation***

Critical insights around cultural analysis of education, especially those around young people's agency and cultural production, have great potential for adding complexities to political-economic studies of higher education.<sup>3</sup> A culturally sensitive political-economy

approach to education and youth gives attention to the capacity of students to mobilise and develop cultural forms as part and parcel of their class-making practices (see for example Jeffrey 2010b). This approach holds onto the view that while individuals are culturally produced through specific educational regimes and state pedagogies, the educated person also produces cultural narratives and practices (Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996). Jeffrey's (2010b) ethnographic study of degree educated unemployed young men in north India demonstrates this by illustrating how they channel abundant time into political activities and fashion novel cultures of masculinity that partially bridge caste divides. Nevertheless, he added that young men engaged in these cultural inventions produced solidarities that only "flickered into life at certain moments" (Jeffrey 2010c, 476), and at the same time reproduced exclusionary ideas around class, gender, and urban space. In another example, Erdreich (2006) argued that Palestinian Israeli women undergraduate students in her study were able to learn new ways of "doing" gender when they enter university. Specifically, they realised that paid work is a powerful resource for bargaining power in the patriarchal space of the home. These women learned that by being financially independent, they could challenge the traditional masculine notion of honour previously built on the idea that men are active providers for the family. In the process, undergraduate women created an alternative vision of university education as more than just studying and getting good grades, but also attached to ideas of freedom from patriarchal control. By attuning to how young people imbue higher education with different normative concerns and meanings, these writings created spaces for the possibility of agentic practices to enact change, even as these practices may simultaneously reproduce certain structural conditions of inequality.

The idea that young people are able to draw on cultural resources from higher education to reinvent themselves also needs to be examined alongside a neoliberal politics of human capital formation. Various studies have pointed to the ways in which young people are

encouraged to fashion themselves as ideal workers for the current conditions of the global economy. For instance, Liu's (2008) study has demonstrated how middle-class youth and families in China have absorbed the neoliberal state discourse of *suzhi* (quality of life), leading to their search for credentials as well as other "complementary strategies" such as becoming a member of the dominant Party in order to gain prestige and mobility in their career. The observation that credentials are no longer enough to secure future prospects is also reflected in Davidson's (2008) ethnographic research that examined middle-class students' strategies of self-cultivation at becoming "marketable" subjects in Silicon Valley, California. In addition, she found that these young people were disciplining and defining themselves through notions of success tied to "liberal" ideals, such as authentic passions and freedom of expression. Based on case studies from different parts of the world, Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011, 142) wrote about how competition for credentials and jobs at the global level has pushed young people to search for cultural capital beyond degree qualifications, with an increasing emphasis on personal capital, which refers to "the extent the self can be packaged to capitalise on personal qualities valued by employers". Specifically they noted that in order for individuals to compete successfully in the global economy, work and educational experience has to be repackaged as "life stories of productive achievements and future promise that must be constantly sold to employers throughout a career" (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011, 142).

What is striking about state-led human capital formations in current global knowledge economies is a growing emphasis on individual responsibility for social reproduction. The individual is now responsible for assembling the best combination of resources, including credentials, skills, experiences, and lifestyles, that is most relevant for maximising one's career pursuit and success. Within the context of the United Kingdom (and many other western nations), Peters (2001, 60) wrote that human capital theory "is rejuvenated in a

privatised rather than statist or public form”, and that the “neo-liberal state has worked to make individual choice in the tertiary education market the overriding operative principle”. Similarly, Anagnost (2013, 2) wrote of how different groups of young people from across East Asia are also making “investments in the self to ensure one’s forward career progression as embodied human capital”. It is now widely argued that neoliberal ideas of, for instance, flexibility, self-enterprise, personal responsibility, adaptability, freedom and so forth, have penetrated the realms of education and learning. Under these pervading discourses, young people are not only encouraged to see themselves as future worker-consumer citizen-subjects in the marketplace, but are also required to embrace the view that accumulation of cultural capital is part of an ongoing project of self-making. The individual as human capital is now recast as an unfinished product that needs to be prudently governed and self-governing, within an imaginary where “human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation” (Anagnost 2004, 189). But as studies by Davidson (2008) and Liu (2008) have shown, such relentless pursuit of cultural profits through education has also led to an intensification of stress and pressure. It is in this context that Anagnost (2013, 15) warned of a “mounting debt of stress, [and] a slow attrition of life” in the contemporary politics of social reproduction. Yet at the same time, optimism and resilience are central to young people’s strategies at navigating situations of intense educational pressure and economic insecurity, often prompting them to keep life going by (re)investing in normative promises. This is a dilemma in which Berlant (2010) terms cruel optimism. The extent to which youthful spirits and energies are produced for replenishing capitalist projects thus needs further critical attention.

Neoliberal production of human capital is also premised on a politics of class-based inclusion and exclusion, or what Skeggs (2011, 503) calls a “classed bio-politics of human as capital”. For instance, in a study of higher educational work placement practices in the

UK, Allen, Quinn and Hollingworth (2013, 10) found that young people fashioned themselves in the image of the neoliberal creative worker “located within systems of classification that work in the interests of the privileged”. Middle-class youth often found themselves more confident and comfortable inhabiting the cosmopolitan subjectivity of the creative worker than their working-class counterpart (see also Allen and Hollingworth 2013). What this suggests is the privileging of an elitist and middle-class ethos embedded within neoliberal discourses of human capital. Likewise, Anagnost (2004) details the manner in which the Chinese government mobilised a discourse of *suzhi* for engineering a high-quality personhood, specifically through the value-coding of two figures: the rural migrant who exemplifies the absence of quality, and the urban middle-class only child whose body is fetishised as a site for accumulation. While she acknowledged that both figures are capable of producing value, it is argued that under the contemporary Chinese political-economic regime, the body that is seen as valuable is “a body to which value has been added through educational investment rather than one from which surplus value has been extracted” (2004, 191). While the subject of value under neoliberalising state and educational regimes is ostensibly produced and maintained by powerful institutions and actors, it must be added that ordinary youth practices and strategies of distinction can also contribute to exclusions, whether intentional or not. In this regard, research have shown that young people’s efforts at overcoming stereotypes and gaining social respect by investing in superior “educated” identities also rest on the exclusionary representation of others as “less educated” or “uneducated” (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2004; Abelman, Park, and Kim 2009; Cheng 2014).

### ***Different subjects, different values***

If middle-class social reproduction through educational investment has become ever more intensified under the current neoliberal ethos, what of those who engage with social

reproduction from different material grounds and normative concerns? Drawing on her research with working-class people, sociologist Beverley Skeggs argued that people positioned in a different time-space vector in relation to capital, such as the working-class, produce value according to alternative desires and aspirations in life that are not aligned to middle-class normativities. Specifically, she suggested that “their claims for value were not acquisitive”, but were “defensive, against moral denigration and misrecognition, [and] protectionist” (Skeggs 2011, 503). This argument provides an important entry point to consider some of ways in which youth narratives and practices can be read against the grain of a seemingly all-pervasive neoliberalism. Reay, Crozier, and Clayton's (2009, 1114) research on English working-class students in elite universities found that these young people did not fully embrace middle-class values and continued to see elite university life as a “bubble” saturated with “compulsive obsessive workaholic dispositions that constitute the highly successful academic habitus”. Even as their energies appeared to be directed towards conforming to middle-class educational norms, they were never fully coded by the neoliberal impetus to invest blindly and to accumulate given their capacity to critique elite norms. Similarly, Hansen's (2012) study of young Beijing migrants who entered vocational training as an alternative avenue for gaining socio-economic mobility demonstrated how the discourse of self-development articulated by students was not a result of state-sponsored neoliberalism. For instance, their motivations for self-development were not directed towards the achievement of an ideal citizenship, but borne out of familial concerns and desire to be treated with respect by escaping the unjust treatment of factory work life. Therefore, these students engaged with self-development “as a tactic by which young migrants aim to become recognised as valuable actors by the market, regardless of state conceptions of ideal citizenship and national needs” (Hansen 2012, 430).

As documented by several studies, globalisation agendas and restructuring of knowledge economies have led to the emergence of non-elite educational markets in different parts of Asia. These educational institutions have become an important avenue for segments of young people who were jostled out of hypercompetitive educational regimes to secure credentials, with the hope of gaining social mobility (Woronov 2011; Hansen 2012; Waters and Leung 2014). Students in these emerging educational markets are often not considered the most highly-educated and privileged individuals, but they are nevertheless more upwardly mobile than their working-class non-elite counterparts. Borrowing the term “educational non-elite” from Brinton’s (2011) work on under/unemployed young men in Japan during the 1990s, Waters and Leung (2014) described a similar cohort of Hong Kong young adults now pursuing educational capitals through transnational degree programs offered in local institutes. While the research illuminated how students saw themselves as “inferior” and attributed their circumstances to personal failings within broader educational and class structures, the question remains as to whether these negative discourses exist alongside more defensive and protectionist narratives. Also, to what extent are the students’ feelings of accountability for their own failings constituted within a neoliberal privatisation of responsibility? As Trnka and Trundle (2014, 141) wrote, social actors “move between different moral, ethical, and affective valences of what it means to be “responsible” subjects”, including multiple forms of “ties, obligations, duties, and reciprocities that lie alongside, challenge, or are reconciled with those of responsibilised, neoliberal subjects”. Woronov’s (2011) case study of Chinese urban youth middling between elite and non-elite positions yielded rather different insights from the case of Hong Kong. In her study, young people were producing a culture outside that of failure despite being labelled as “stupid”, “spendthrift”, and “hopeless”. Instead, they “countered the relentless moral discourse of the hegemonic ideology by creating their own moral communities” (Woronov 2011, 94), including taking pride in their street-smartness and ability to earn their own spending

money. What comparative insights might ethnographic case studies of educational non-elites in other geographical contexts contribute to this hitherto under-examined youth experiences?

The capacity for non-elite youth to create their own moral discourses and alternative values also direct critical attention to how young people cultivate friendships, solidarities, gain social capital for building trust and confidence, as well as learn to challenge dominant power scripts in situations of loss, frustration, and alienation (Mitchell 2007; Jeffrey and McFarlane 2008). More broadly speaking, it has long been argued that education and learning “have a critical correspondence with the global economy because of its role in providing a focus and forum for the development of resistance to the status quo” (Tikly 2001, 161). Additionally, education has the potential to provide students with a platform for developing a cosmopolitan ethic, where they learn about their own social identities and cultural trajectories, “but always in ways that underscore their connectivity with the rest of the world” (Rizvi 2009, 264). For instance, Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) illustrated the possibility of university students to learn about “good” citizenship from volunteering in ways that lead to deconstructive critical reflections, such as becoming more politically aware and sensitive to issues of social justice. In a study by Brooks (2007) on the role of friendships in higher educational experiences, she underlined how students engaged in cross-cultural learning by studying and living alongside peers from different backgrounds. In both studies, though, the authors warned of an element of reproductive momentum at work: volunteering can reinforce existing power relations between the “savior” and the “helpless”; and mutual learning among friends can be used to stress one’s superior knowledge over another instead of furthering collaborative success. Nevertheless, critical research like these are only beginning to scratch the surface of a deeper question of what, apart from cultures of accumulation, employability, social mobility, and competitiveness,

do young people learn in contemporary educational spaces? Drawing attention to these potential for progressive forms of learning is not a naïve project, but rather one that aligns to Chakrabarty's (2000) argument about the need for uncovering ruptures and discontinuities to the hegemony of capitalist value. This is not simply an effort to search for different expressions of cultures. Rather, it constitutes a critical agenda for reflecting on how the current dominant theoretical imaginary of human *as* capital has implications for understanding the shifting classed/cultural politics of neoliberalising education and young people's citizenship (see Ruddick 2003; Katz 2008; Kraftl 2015).

### **Young people's spatialities: new normativities, subjectivities, and politics**

Empirical studies from diverse situations have revealed the manner in which youth subjectivities, agency, and political acts are constituted in and through intersecting vectors of power that span across the "local" and the "global" (Jeffrey 2011; 2012; Häkli and Kallio 2013). Through these studies, scholars have shown that young people's everyday, local experiences under global economic change are often complex and paradoxical. For instance, young men and women may be drawn into circumstances where their perceptions of education and futures are framed by a mixture of hopes, optimism, fears and anticipation (Smith 2012; Deuchar 2014). Still, young people's citizenship subjectivities may be reconfigured in ways that require them to navigate conflicting values such as individualism versus collectivism and free-choice versus national loyalty (Hoffman 2006; Liu 2008). In terms of political practices, young people may be engaged in progressive forms of social movements, but at the same time become complicit with dominant structures of power (Jeffrey 2008b; 2010b). Therefore, specific sets of youth experiences need to be understood through their particular constellation of power structures, spatial frames, and temporal contexts, in order to grasp fully the actual geographies produced and made within neoliberalising regimes. Current research about young people's everyday lives within

rapidly changing contexts have also ushered in several fresh and exciting analytical emphases: first, there is a growing attention to the everyday moral and emotional concerns that structure their lives – *new normativities*; second, there is an increasing focus on young people as social actors and ethical subjects – *new subjectivities*; and third, there is an ongoing exploration of their emergent and inventive political performances – *new politics*. Taken together, these three “new” thematic accents provide an extended basis to examine youth narratives and practices around citizenship in contemporary educational spaces.

### *New normativities*

The idea that young people’s voices and concerns should be of interest to geographers investigating a range of issues across political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres is not a novel one. Part of this commitment has to do with using young people’s interpretations of the world to counteract the adultist assumptions underpinning notions such as that of life transitions (Valentine 2003; Worth 2009), mobilities (Skelton 2009; Aitken and Plows 2010), and social participation (Skelton 2007; 2010). In doing so, geographers have also made a significant contribution towards deepening the ways we can understand how young people inhabit and use time and space in various places and moments of their lives. The proliferation of scholarship over the last two decades emphasising the need to listen to young people’s voices has even led scholars such as Kraftl (2013) and Philo (2011) to flag this out as a problematic argument. In particular, they cautioned that this sort of argument tends to frame young people, more specifically children, as constituted independently of intergenerational relationships and, in some cases, helps efface adult responsibility. While these concerns remain instructive for critical debates and reflections, it is also important to note that the project of taking seriously young people’s voices is far from being over. In fact, their narratives and practices have become all the more important in the contemporary moment, given the increasing pressure for them to bear the risk and burden of social

reproduction. This is further compounded by a contemporary states' preoccupation with young bodies as transgressive and in need of control, and at the same time viewing them as proxies of the future (Katz 2008; Smith 2012). Despite identifying the problematic aspect of young people's voices, Kraftl (2013) explicitly wrote that scholars should not dispense with their continued importance. To this end, he raised the possibility of "reinvigorating" voices to draw attention to the banal issues that *matter* to young people in the context of everyday life, even if they are not overtly "political".

A growing number of geographical studies have indeed gone beyond stressing young people's capacity to act "politically" in an overt manner, and instead explored the everyday concerns that constitute ordinarily structured lives of children and youth. The recent writings on children's geographies of emotions and affect constitute one such effort (Brown 2011; Blazek and Windram-Geddes 2013). For instance, Brown (2011) wrote about the disconnection between young people's actual emotional dispositions (i.e. aspirations) and the ways they were represented in policy debates in the UK. Specifically, he argued that young people in his study aspired towards emotional well-being and stability, such as finding an enjoyable job (and not necessarily high-paying), having a loving family, and to get by comfortably. These concrete aspirations fail to be reflected in the policy goal of promoting self-empowered youth citizens who would strive for social mobility. In Kraftl's (2008) study on childhood-hope, he found that young people's definitions of self-esteem are entangled with feelings of happiness and positive sense of self-worth. But more importantly for him, hope is an affective force that emerge in young people's ongoing practices of living and coping in the world: "hope was manifested in very small steps, relatively *modest* coping mechanisms and minute changes in individuals' attitudes to life" (Kraftl 2008, 88). These studies have variously pointed to the manner in which the less effable "stuff" of the world,

such as feelings and sentiments, can reveal rich insights into the seemingly banal but political matters that are of utmost concern to people in specific situations.

Some of these relatively new explorations into the realm of situational emotions and concerns are connected to wider discussions in human geography on the normative dimension of everyday life (e.g. Olson 2015). At the heart of these writings is the reminder that our thoughts and actions in the world cannot be reduced into products of power and discourses (see Barnett 2012; 2013). Rather, practices and narratives can be embedded in ethical norms that emerge through situated ways of knowing and feeling, rather than those that are reduced to covert interests and ideologies. One way of capturing this irreducibility of actions is through a view of social practices that maintain people's actions are guided by an ongoing process of reasoning rooted in everyday forms of rationality (Rorty 1996; Rouse 2007). For Sayer (2005, 949), an attendance to everyday forms of moral reasoning provides a way to understand the extent to which power structures and dominant discourses are brought to bear on people as human beings: "The most important questions and concerns people tend to face in their everyday lives are normative ones of how to act, what to do for the best, what is good or bad about what is happening, including how others are treating them and things which they care about." While this quote may seem self-evident, it forces us to re-evaluate some basic assumptions underpinning many works about neoliberal governmentality and capital accumulation within educational spaces, where the youthful subject is almost always encountered as submerged within the discursive power of neoliberalism. Directing analytic energies to the lay motives, norms, and values that give texture to young people's conduct and actions can potentially open up fresh perspectives on the manner in which people reason by drawing on multiple sources of moral and ethical beliefs (Sykes 2009), where diverse values are produced (Lee 2006), and where practices of evaluation lead to different geographies of worth (Barnett 2013).

### *New subjectivities*

Recent geographical research has also placed growing emphasis on the interpersonal and “social” nature of young people’s subjectivities. As Jamieson and Milne (2012, 265) assert, critical work on the lives of children and youth as embedded within social networks and relationships is particularly relevant to appraise “claims about radical re-orientations of social values and social integration made using such encompassing terms as ‘individualisation’, ‘democratisation’ and ‘commercialisation’” which dominate western accounts of youth agency . Within geography, the recognition of young people as social rather than individual actors has long been registered in the view that the social worlds of children and youth are interconnected to the realm of the family. But as Valentine (2008, 2105) observed, “intimacy and care increasingly takes place beyond the family, for example, through networks of friends and lovers”. Weller's (2010) study on children’s schooling experiences has shown that young people do not always identify close affiliations with the family, but instead actively make decisions to relate to or distance from families and friends depending on circumstances. Similarly, Brooks and Waters (2010) explored the significance of friendship networks in reinforcing young people’s decisions to migrate overseas for education. Empirical research from various contexts has also shown that friendship plays a significant role in young people’s social well-being, by providing each other with support and care, as well as company and fun (see Bunnell et al. 2012). While friendship is often a key site where young men and women forge bonds and solidarities, it can also develop in and through instrumental concerns and unequal power relations, as well as reproduce class and gender norms (Jeffrey 2010b; Dyson 2010). These works point to the importance of viewing young people’s subjectivities around both cultural production and reproduction as emerging from different kinds of interdependencies, rather than individual autonomy.

Somewhat related to this new emphasis on youth sociality – that young people not only inhabit spaces of relationality but also act in relation to others – is a modestly growing pool of studies focusing on how they perform moral and ethical forms of subjectivities. Writing on the topic of international volunteering, Baillie-Smith et al. (2013) showed that young UK Christians volunteering in Latin America expressed understandings of global humanity and community that reflect a form of cosmopolitanism which evades reflections on poverty and inequalities. Nevertheless, their actual experiences of volunteering also prompted a degree of reflexivity that is simultaneously shaped by their religious values to produce more critical attitudes towards meanings of cosmopolitan and global citizenship (see also Hopkins et al. 2015). The study by Holdsworth and Quinn (2012, 392) also explicitly showed that student volunteering “can be associated with motives that are more to do with students seeking to understand and potentially challenge normative ideologies and inequalities, rather than students’ own self-promotion”. Other studies on marginalised and vulnerable youth have also argued that ethical forms of sociality such as mutual care and cross-community solidarities are part of the “cultures of cosmopolitan survival that allow subordinated people to defend their access to social goods, money, and respect” (Jeffrey and McFarlane 2008, 425). Across these writings, scholars emphasised the importance of reading for ruptures and disjunctures in neoliberal formations through counterintuitive forms of youth practices and reflexivities. The notion of gifting through time, energy, labour and passion constitutes one potential way to interpret such ethical performances of sociality. In doing so, more vibrant forms of actually existing subjectivities can be located beyond the dominant image of a “care-less” and self-interested person often assumed to be fostered by neoliberal acts (see Lynch, Lyons, and Cantillon 2007).

The capacity of young people to engage with progressive forms of learning has also emerged in some of these works on youth subjectivities. In this context, learning is

understood as an ongoing process that emerges through situated practices and interactions, therefore opened to possibilities of change (Lave and Wenger 1991). This formulation problematises the idea that learning can be straightforwardly transformed into a form of investment or conflated with capitalist work ethic (see Simons 2006; Gerrard 2014). For example, numerous studies with non-elite youth have pointed to how learning subjectivities are not always shaped by the rules of education as a strategic and competitive game, but are rooted in values of mutual accountability and cooperation (Skeggs 2011; Woronov 2011). Additionally, instead of viewing young people as learning in a manner that reproduces injurious forms of structural hierarchies and inequalities, emphasis is also given to those pedagogical sources and activities that orientate youth subjectivities towards what Mitchell (2007) calls the intimate cosmopolitan. Some of the above-mentioned works have already suggested the possibilities of mutual learning about justice and inequalities within contact zones of difference. They also hinted at how learning takes place in diverse sites within and beyond the immediate context of formal education, thereby broadening the spatialities through which scholars should consider when reading for where, when, and how young people cultivate ethical subjectivities. More broadly, ideas about progressive or cosmopolitan learning have a stronger presence in educational writings on critical postcolonial pedagogies (Rizvi 2009; Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014). Yet, very little of these ideas are being registered in existing geographical works on education and learning (Reh, Rabenstein, and Fritzsche 2011; Holloway and Jöns 2012). Exploring new forms of learning subjectivities constituted in and through non-violent, caring, and loving practices can also reveal existing sources of political pedagogies and actions, where people are seen as already having the capacities to act both ethically and politically in the world (Smith 2005; Lawson 2009). The theme of political agency and young people's politics will be the next focus of discussion.

### *New politics*

Geographers have contributed significantly to the now established idea that young people are political actors in various ways (Philo and Smith 2003; Skelton 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2013). There is also evidence that young people are competent interlocutors of political processes, are politically active, and engage in different ecologies of protests based on particularistic loyalties such as religion and caste (Jeffrey 2008a; 2012). Across these writings, scholars have demonstrated the artificiality of a binary between “Politics” (macro-politics) and “politics” (micro-politics). In particular, Skelton (2010, 147) argued that even if young people produce a different genre of politics as compared to those that are produced by adults, that does not necessarily mean that “what they articulate is less worthy, less of a genuine political analysis, [and] less of a critique that might lead to change” For her, young people’s political practices not only reside between this binary, but “they have the capacity to blend and meld both types of politics simultaneously” in particular situations (Skelton 2010, 148). This argument recalls the point that children and youth have long been bound up in broader political struggles and movements that span across national, regional, and diasporic spaces (Philo and Smith 2003), therefore making it difficult to categorise straightforwardly their political performances into macro and micro dimensions. But beyond these assertions that children and youth *are* political and *can* act politically, recent works also generate novel insights into how young people’s politics might be understood and theorised in relation to conceptual terms such as structure, agency, and change that underpin much of contemporary human geographical thought. Two interrelated analytical themes about young people’s political performances can be distilled from these works: their subtlety and inventiveness, and their emergent and dialogical nature.

A key way in which young people exercise political agency is through everyday forms of resistance, reworking, and resilience (Katz 2004). These political expressions can be

articulated in a variety of styles. For instance, Cheng (2014) has demonstrated how international students in a Singaporean university manipulate time in very subtle ways to cope with an accelerated change in their temporal experience of schooling. For Zembylas (2013), students' emotional reflections about issues of social justice can evoke modest activist acts and gestures. It has also been pointed out that young people engage with vibrant acts of talking and creative dialogues in ways which produce notions of rights and justice aimed at reworking dominant discourses (Skelton 2010; Hopkins 2011). Related to this performative politics of talking is the idea that young people are capable of articulating critiques. Numerous writings, such as Kallio and Häkli's (2011) research on children's political participation in Finland and Dyson's (2010) work on girls' friendship in the Indian Himalayas, have shown the informal ways in which young people develop political sensibilities through the circulation of critiques aimed at pernicious norms and dominant power. Kipnis (2001), in particular, argue that overt countercultures often found in western classical works on student resistance (e.g. Willis 1977) cannot be replicated straightforwardly in many educational contexts in East Asia. He showed that student resistance in non-western contexts tended to be articulated in subtle ways, such as disrespecting teachers, critiquing the examination system, ostracizing academically oriented peers, and cheating. All these works on everyday political agency point to the manner in which young people have the capacity to act and respond to matters of concern in resourceful and creative ways that might not necessarily be overtly resistive. Attention to these delicate expressions of youth agency and political acts can broaden critical consideration of what youth practices might be considered "political" in highly pedagogical state and educational regimes.

In many of these recent works, there is an emphasis on the emergent and dialogical nature of youth political agency and practices. Research has demonstrated that youth agency is

constituted within structural constraints and opportunities emerging from specific articulations of power and durations (Johnson-Hanks 2002; Jeffrey 2010a). This implies that “the meanings of the political may not be known in advance and thus need to be worked out empirically” in their emergent contexts (Häkli and Kallio 2013, 195). Writing about a generative form of political work performed by a segment of youth in north India, Jeffrey and Dyson (2014) demonstrated how these young people channelled time and energy into building and protecting resources in their community. They were able to engage in these activities precisely because of their precarious position as educated under/unemployed people. Making the similar point about the emergent nature of political practices, various studies demonstrated how recent neoliberal changes have precipitated the resurgence of youth activism, protest, and student politics in different parts of the world (Zeilig and Ansell 2008; Radcliffe and Webb 2014; see also Jeffrey 2012). As Häkli and Kallio (2013) evinced, young people’s political agency is evoked when the knowledges, habits, and routines tied to their everyday concerns are interrupted or challenged. This conception of political agency is underwritten by a pragmatist reading of power as “something that makes things happen: it is what enables us to *make a difference* in the world” (Allen 2008, 1614). When conceived in this manner, even if young people’s political acts may be directed towards the more personal and intimate stuff of everyday life, they nevertheless entail “a desire to make the world – bit by bit, unevenly, by accident as well as by design – into a better place” (Wood and Smith 2008, 1527). It is perhaps within this formulation of the “political” that we might better appreciate young people’s situated politics as articulated through diverse moralities and normative commitments based on specific material relations.

## **Ethnography and geographies of higher education and youth**

Emergent issues around globalising higher education and citizenship, cultural reproduction and politics of human capital, and new spatialities of young people can benefit from ethnographically informed geographical analyses. The role of ethnography for studying cultural politics of identities, teacher-student power relations, institutional practices, and student cultures is a well-established one within educational studies and anthropologies of education (Foley 1991; Eisenhart 2001; Yon 2003; Hammersley 2006). In a broad overview of the history of educational ethnography, Yon (2003, 412) noted the exponential growth in ethnographic research since the latter twentieth century has to do with both its “attractiveness and promise... to take the reader into the actual world of its subjects” and its ability to offer qualitative and culturally sensitive insights. For similar reasons, scholars have also sought to reinforce the value of ethnography for human geography (Herbert 2000; Hart 2004; Horschelmann and Stenning 2008; Laurie 2012). Herbert (2000, 551), for instance, proposed that ethnography is distinctively useful because “its intensive analysis and fine-grained detail provide the optimal way to illustrate and explicate the oft-stated connection between the life world of a social group and the geographical world they construct”. Recent geographical research that uses ethnographic approaches to study education and young people has included accounts such as those of neoliberal change on youth engagement with education and politics (Jeffrey 2008b; 2010b), micro-geographies of student transitions (Holton 2014; 2015), international students as transnational urban agents (Collins 2010), and neoliberal politics of middle-class citizenship reproduction (Davidson 2008). Considering this somewhat common interest in ethnography across educational studies, anthropologies of education, and human geography, I suggest their mutual engagements has the potential to generate rich and complex accounts of globalising higher education, citizenship, and youth. I proceed to develop a conceptual framework for one such account.

One key point emerging from recent scholarship on globalising higher education is the diversification of educational provision and consumption. While geographical research on reproduction of middle-class citizenship has given attention to young people's investment in elite education at established universities, there is less focus on the burgeoning non-elite higher educational institutes that largely cater to students who wish to secure credentials despite being jostled out of competitive university entrance regimes. These educational institutes constitute an unacknowledged underbelly of contemporary images and narratives about citizenship formation in globalising higher education. The burgeoning private educational institutes in many parts of Asia, which mostly provide franchised international study programs and accreditation, represent a prime example of this underbelly in a geographical region undergoing rapid expansion and internationalisation of higher education (ADB 2012; UNESCO 2014). Private higher education therefore offers a novel site to investigate a range of questions around the neoliberal production of (middle-class) youth citizenship recast through the lens of non-elite youth. Studies advocating for a culturally sensitive approach to examine social reproduction also pointed to the importance of cultural formations within class-making practices. Given the exceptional emphasis placed on human capital cultivation through tertiary and higher education across nation-states in East and Southeast Asia (Marginson 2010; Mok and Yu 2011), the classed and cultural politics around value-coding of youthful bodies becomes ever more important for in-depth research. In particular, do educational non-elites in these institutes articulate the same kinds of values, cosmopolitan aspirations, and youth strategies as those that have hitherto been registered in recent writings on elite and middle-class reproduction in higher education? Relatedly, scholars researching on youth agency, subjectivities, and politics have made remarkable progress in terms of imagining new ways to understand young people's spatial practices and relationships. Many of these conceptual resources remain under-utilised in existing studies on changing higher education spaces and student lives. To this end, ethnography provides

three particular appeals to address these insights and questions from a geographical standpoint, based on its incisive attention to the spatialities of “one small place” (Laurie 2012, 500) as the locus of investigation.

The first is an appreciation for the embodied dimensions of neoliberal educational change and citizenship subjectivities. Gupta and Ferguson (2002, 984) have written that ethnography is especially useful for attending to those “implicit, unmarked, signifying practices” around state governmentality, which “often slip below the threshold of discursivity but profoundly alter how bodies are oriented, how lives are lived, and how subjects are formed”. Their focus was on how mundane practices of governmentality and technologies of power are circulated to shape everyday life. While this framework draws attention to those actually existing practices of neoliberalism and their effects on different social groups, it does not adequately address the diverse responses that people produce in relation to powerful discourses. With respect to this, ethnographic accounts bring nuance to the manner in which processes associated with globalisation and neoliberal restructuring are “scaled into”, reproduced and challenged through young people’s embodied narratives and practices. Even when the analytic focus is on a single place such as that of the educational institution, young people’s ideas and actions are also constituted in and through sites beyond that of the immediate educational environment. For instance, students within the campus can create “meaning systems to explain the wellsprings of action” (Herbert 2000, 554) with references to their experiences in families, city streets, online social media, and religious institutions. In attending to this interconnected and multi-sited infusion of meanings, ethnography can broaden the range of spatialities that young people construct. This helps to enrich understandings of how youthful subjects navigate a plurality of worlds, where they internalise “a stock of schemes of action or habits that are non-homogeneous” to produce differently motivated practices (Lahire 2011, 26). When this view is read alongside

writings about neoliberal production of citizenship, it eschews a singularly constituted citizen-subject and opens up analytical spaces for considering alternative cultural and value systems that young people draw on to produce citizenship identities. This ethnographically informed perspective of citizenship production is thus well-aligned to current geographical understanding of the embodied and performative aspects of everyday life “as an arena for the contestation and transformation of dominant, often repressive, modalities of citizenship” (Dickinson et al. 2008, 105).

The second appeal is a fine-grained analysis of connections between normativity and power and politics, allowing for a closer inspection of those subtle, and sometimes paradoxical, ways in which students produce critiques, contestations, and resistances. Scholars have argued that many accounts of neoliberal governmentality in advanced liberal societies tend to reduce politics into “mentalities of rule” that failed to register the ways in which neoliberal programmes are disrupted and challenged from ordinary people’s everyday practices (O’Malley, Weir and Shearing 1997; Barnett et al. 2008). Ethnography not only draws attention to the delicate ways in which young people may act against dominant ideas, but also complicate these expressions of power through specific meanings invested into them. For instance, Willis’s (1977) ethnography on British lads has shown how young people mobilise friendship to produce and circulate critiques of middle-class norms. But at the same time, their friendship solidarities simultaneously reinforce their working-class identification and status. To this end, various ethnographies of youth practices in particular political-economic contexts have revealed the progressive and regressive nature of young people’s engagement with politics (Jeffrey 2011). In a somewhat different interpretation of politics that foregrounds experimentation, Kraftl (2015) has argued that young people can perform alternative forms of politics centred around the body as a site of radical possibilities for the conduct of life (i.e. alternative biopolitics). He urged for careful reading

of crevices and moments within educational spaces where children (and youth) produce practices, emotions/affects, and visions that do not correspond to neoliberal forms of governance. Critical writings about cosmopolitan learnings and autonomous non-elite (or working-class) values provide some potential cues to read for such “alternative” political performances. Searching for interruptions to the often-apparent rationales and habits organised around neoliberal constructs would require time and energy. The value of ethnography for this kind of project resides in its call for patience to listen to the “murmurings of the everyday” (De Certeau 1984); to how students can problematise and reinterpret their experiences; and to the seemingly unremarkable, mundane, and fleeting gestures that nonetheless constitute meaningful political acts in their own small ways (see also Laurier and Philo 2006).

The final appeal of ethnography is reflected in Horschelmann and Stenning's (2008, 344) assertion that “*situated* accounts do not deny, but rather bring into relief the intersections of ‘flows’ and relations that *place* people and things in particular but never fixed or stagnant constellations of power”. They go on to argue that ethnography is therefore a mode of engagement with (rather than observation of) particular people and places, and of producing (rather than surveying) difference and knowledge. An ethnographic account that is sympathetic to the culturally constructed narratives and practices of young people privileges a form of engagement and knowledge production based on their normative concerns, moral reasoning, and practical encounters with power structures. For instance, Woronov (2011) showed that despite being drawn into an emergent structural class location within contemporary China, vocational students never conceded to being a segment of “failed” youth and instead produced their own geographies of worth based on dignity and esteem. Such an ethnographic account should not be seen as an attempt to elide the weighty issues of structural inequalities around class and gender, but should be read as part of the “actual

world” that represents how young people can conduct their lives differently. In doing so, we catch a glimpse into new student cultures, practices, and rationalities that may hitherto be eclipsed by taken-for-granted terms such as “market”, “privatisation”, and “neoliberal subjectivity” (see Birch and Siemiatycki 2015). These different ideas of personhood and of social relations can be the basis of a cultural critique that underlines countercurrents that coexist with any given cultural formation, whether they serve to unsettle western constructs (Marcus and Fisher 1986) or to demonstrate the partiality of cultural hegemonies (Ortner 2005). Furthermore, globalisation and neoliberalisation, as well as their allied processes of capitalist-driven human capital formation and educational-class differentiation, are not happening within discrete, bounded communities. Ethnography’s emphasis on small places and specific lives is therefore always about “the intersecting destinies of human lives, wherever they happen to be lived out” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, 172). This ethnographic principle holds immense potential for engaging with the idea of “contemporaneous heterogeneities” (Massey 2005, 5), which currently underwrites some important research on youth experiences of global economic change within human geography (see Katz 2004; Waters 2006; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008).

## **Conclusion**

In this survey of literature, I have reviewed selected writings across geographical, sociological, and anthropological research on education and young people. Specifically, I have focused on three substantive themes around the neoliberal politics of youth citizenship in globalising higher education that are of current interest to human geographers. The first theme focused on the shifting spatialities of higher education and citizenship in the current global economy. I have pointed to the importance of considering the role of young people in contemporary rescaling of citizenship in neoliberalising higher education. I have also highlighted how current understandings of neoliberalism have benefited from ethnographic

works that focused on young people's engagement with social reproduction in formal education. The second theme picked up questions around class and inequalities in this new ethos of capital accumulation through educational investment, by considering the enduring relevance of works on social and cultural reproduction for a critical analysis of the shifting politics around human capital in contemporary knowledge economies. I also pointed out how current geographical scholarship on middle-class social reproduction has neglected non-elite forms of educational spaces and subjects. The third theme drew on recent geographical writings on children and young people to introduce three new spatial perspectives on youth normativities, subjectivities, and politics. I have suggested that these under-explored spatialities of young people provide an extended basis to examine critically youth narratives and practices around education and citizenship. In the last section, I highlighted ethnography's affinities with educational research and human geography, and developed an ethnographically sensitive conceptual framework for studying globalising higher education, citizenship, and youth, with particular emphasis on the burgeoning non-elite, private higher educational institutes in Asia. In summary, my account provided a basis for constructing a theoretically and empirically informed framework to study young people's performance of citizenship through higher education in the context of neoliberal globalisation, with a focus on so-called non-elite educational spaces and subjects.

## Notes

1. Anagnost (2004) and Yan (2003), for example, have tended to discuss the *suzhi* (education for quality) discourse in contemporary China as a distinctive regime fully submerged within neoliberalism.
2. See also Holt (2008) for usefulness of Bourdieu's concept of social capital for geographical research.
3. In Jeffrey's (2008) report in *Progress in Human Geography*, it is suggested that the work of scholars associated with the so-called Birmingham School Centre for Cultural Studies can be usefully read alongside Bourdieu's writings about cultural reproduction.

## References

- Abelmann, N., S. J. Park, and H. Kim. 2009. College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10 (2):229–247.
- ADB. 2012. *Private Higher Education Across Asia: Expanding Access, Searching for Quality*. Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank.
- Ahier, J., J. Beck, and R. Moore. 2003. *Graduate Citizens: Issues of Citizenship and Higher Education*. London: Routledge.
- Aitken, S. C., and V. Plows. 2010. Overturning assumptions about young people, border spaces and revolutions. *Children's Geographies* 8 (4):327–333.
- Allen, J. 2008. Pragmatism and power, or the power to make a difference in a radically contingent world. *Geoforum* 39 (4):1613–1624.
- Allen, K., and S. Hollingworth. 2013. “Sticky subjects” or “cosmopolitan creatives”? Social class, place and urban young people’s aspirations for work in the knowledge economy. *Urban Studies* 50 (3):499–517.
- Allen, K., J. Quinn, S. Hollingworth, and A. Rose. 2013. Becoming employable students and “ideal” creative workers: exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (3):431–452.
- Althusser, L. 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. L. Althusser, 136-170. London: New Left Books.
- Anagnost, A. 2013. Introduction: life-making in neoliberal times. In *Global Futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy in Uncertain Times*, eds. A. Anagnost, A. Arai, and H. Ren, 1–28. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- . 2004. The corporeal politics of quality (suzhi). *Public Culture* 16 (2):189–208.
- Arnot, M., and S. Swartz. 2012. Youth citizenship and the politics of belonging: introducing contexts, voices, imaginaries. *Comparative Education* 48 (1):1–10.
- Baillie-Smith, M., N. Laurie, P. Hopkins, and E. Olson. 2013. International volunteering, faith and subjectivity: negotiating cosmopolitanism, citizenship and development. *Geoforum* 45:126–135.
- Ball, S. J. 2009. Privatising education , privatising education policy , privatising educational research : network governance and the 'competition state'. *Journal of Education Policy* 24 (1):83–99.
- Barnett, C. 2013. Geography and ethics III: from moral geographies to geographies of worth. *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (1):151–160.

- . 2012. Geography and ethics: placing life in the space of reasons. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (3):379–388.
- Barnett, C., N. Clarke, P. Cloke, and A. Malpass. 2008. The elusive subjects of neo-liberalism. *Cultural Studies* 22 (5):624–653.
- Bathmaker, A. M., N. Ingram, and R. Waller. 2013. Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (5-6):723–743.
- Berlant, L. 2010. Cruel optimism. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. M. Gregg and G. Seigworth, 93–157. United States of America: Duke University Press.
- Birch, K., and M. Siemiatycki. 2015. Neoliberalism and the geographies of marketization: the entangling of state and markets. *Progress in Human Geography* Advanced online publication: <http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0309132515570512>.
- Bjarnason, S., K. Cheng, J. Fielden, M.-J. Lemaitre, D. Levy, and N. V. Varfhese. 2009. *A New Dynamic: Private Higher Education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Blazek, M., and M. Windram-Geddes. 2013. Editorial: Thinking and doing children's emotional geographies. *Emotion, Space and Society* 9:1–3.
- Bourdieu, P., and J. Passeron. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Brinton, M. C. 2011. *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brooks, R. 2007. Friends, peers and higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28 (6):693–707.
- Brooks, R., and J. Waters. 2010. Social networks and educational mobility: the experiences of UK students. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 8 (1):143–157.
- Brown, G. 2011. Emotional geographies of young people's aspirations for adult life. *Children's Geographies* 9 (1):7–22.
- Brown, P., and S. Tannock. 2009. Education, meritocracy and the global war for talent. *Journal of Education Policy* 24 (4):377–392.
- Brown, P., H. Lauder, and D. Ashton. 2011. *The Global Auction: the Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bunnell, T., S. Yea, L. Peake, T. Skelton, and M. Smith. 2012. Geographies of friendships. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (4):490–507.
- Burgess, S., and Wilson, D. (2005) Ethnic segregation in England's schools, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (1):20-36.

- Burke, P. J. 2011. Masculinity, subjectivity and neoliberalism in men's accounts of migration and higher educational participation. *Gender and Education* 23 (2):169–184.
- Cairns, K. 2013. The subject of neoliberal affects: rural youth envision their futures. *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 57 (3):337–344.
- Castree, N. 2006. From neoliberalism to neoliberalisation: consolations, confusions, and necessary illusions. *Environment and Planning A* 38 (1):1–6.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cheng, Y. 2014. Time protagonists: student migrants, practices of time, and cultural construction of the Singapore-educated person. *Social & Cultural Geography* 15 (4):385–405.
- Collins, F. L. 2010. Negotiating un/familiar embodiments: investigating the corporeal dimensions of South Korean international student mobilities in Auckland, New Zealand. *Population, Space and Place* 16 (1):51–62.
- Collins, D., and T. Coleman. 2008. Social geographies of education: looking within, and beyond school boundaries. *Geography Compass* 2 (1):281–299.
- Comaroff, J., and Comaroff, J. 2003. Ethnography on an awkward scale: postcolonial anthropology and the violence of abstraction. *Ethnography* 4 (2):147–79.
- Davidson, E. 2008. Marketing the self: the politics of aspiration among middle-class Silicon Valley youth. *Environment and Planning A* 40 (12):2814–2830.
- De Certeau, M. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Deuchar, A. 2014. Ambivalence and optimism: the contradictory meanings of education for lower middle class young men in Dehradun, India. *Geoforum* 55:143–151.
- Dickinson, J., M. J., andrucki, E. Rawlins, and V. Cook. 2008. Introduction : geographies of everyday citizenship. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 7 (2):100–112.
- Durkheim, E. 1956. *Education and Society*. London: Free Press.
- Dyson, J. 2010. Friendship in practice: girls' work in the Indian Himalayas. *American Ethnologist* 37 (3):482–498.
- Eisenhart, M. 2001. Educational ethnography past, present, and future: ideas to think with. *Educational Researcher* 30 (8):16–27.

- England, K., and K. Ward. 2007. Conclusion: reflections on neoliberalization. In *Neoliberalization: States, Networks, Peoples*, eds. K. England and K. Ward, 248-246. Malden: Blackwell.
- Erdreich, L. 2006. Degendering the honor/care conflation: Palestinian Israeli university women's appropriations of independence. *ETHOS* 34 (1):132-164.
- Foley, D. E. 1991. Rethinking school ethnographies of colonial settings : a performance perspective of reproduction and resistance. *Comparative Education Review* 35 (3):532–551.
- Freeman, C. 2011. Neoliberalism: embodying and affecting neoliberalism. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, ed. F. E. Mascia-Lees, 353–369. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gagen, E. A. 2013. Governing emotions: citizenship, neuroscience and the education of youth. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40 (1):140–152.
- Gerrard, J. 2014. All that is solid melts into work: self-work, the “learning ethic” and the work ethic. *The Sociological Review* 62 (4):862–879.
- Gifford, C., A. Mycock, and J. Murakami. 2014. Becoming citizens in late modernity: a global-national comparison of young people in Japan and the UK. *Citizenship Studies* 18 (1):81–98.
- Giroux, H. 2003. Youth, higher education, and the crisis of public time: educated hope and the possibility of a democratic future. *Social Identities* 9 (2):141–168.
- Gupta, A., and J. Ferguson. 2002. Spatialising states: towards an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. *American Ethnologist* 29 (4):981–1002.
- Haigh, M. 2008. Internationalisation, planetary citizenship and Higher Education Inc. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 38 (4):427–440.
- Hall, S., and L. Appleyard. 2011. Commoditising learning: cultural economy and the growth of for-profit business education service firms in London. *Environment and Planning A* 43 (1):10–27.
- Hammersley, M. 2006. Ethnography: problems and prospects. *Ethnography and Education* 1 (1):3–14.
- Hansen, A. S. 2012. Learning the knacks of actually existing capitalism : young Beijing migrants and the problem of value. *Critique of Anthropology* 32 (4):415–434.
- Hart, G. 2004. Geography and development: critical ethnographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 28 (1):91–100.
- Häkli, J., and K. P. Kallio. 2013. Subject, action and polis: theorizing political agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2):181–200.

- Herbert, S. 2000. For ethnography. *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (4):550–568.
- Hoffman, L. 2006. Autonomous choices and patriotic professionalism: on governmentality in late-socialist China. *Economy and Society* 35 (4):550–570.
- Holdsworth, C., and J. Quinn. 2012. The epistemological challenge of higher education student volunteering: “reproductive” or “deconstructive” volunteering? *Antipode* 44 (2):386–405.
- Hollingworth, S., and L. Archer. 2010. Urban schools as urban places: school reputation, children’s identities and engagement with education in London. *Urban Studies* 47 (3):584–603.
- Holloway, S. L., and H. Jöns. 2012. Geographies of education and learning. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37 (4):482–488.
- Holloway, S. L., and H. Pimlott-Wilson. 2014. Enriching children, institutionalizing childhood? Geographies of play, extracurricular activities, and parenting in England. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104 (3):613–627.
- . 2012. Neoliberalism , policy localisation and idealised subjects : a case study on educational restructuring in England. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37 (4):639–654.
- . 2011. The politics of aspiration: neo-liberal education policy, “low” parental aspirations, and primary school Extended Services in disadvantaged communities. *Children’s Geographies* 9 (1):79–94.
- Holloway, S. L., P. Hubbard, H. Jöns, and H. Pimlott-Wilson. 2010. Geographies of education and the significance of children, youth and families. *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (5):583–600.
- Holt, L. 2008. Embodied social capital and geographic perspectives: performing the habitus. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (2):227–246.
- . 2007. Children’s sociospatial (re)production of disability within primary school playgrounds, *Environment and Planning D* 25 (5):783–802.
- Holton, M. 2015. Adapting relationships with place: investigating the evolving place attachment and “sense of place” of UK higher education students during a period of intense transition. *Geoforum* 59:21–29.
- . 2014. The geographies of UK university halls of residence: examining students’ embodiment of social capital. *Children’s Geographies* Advanced online publication: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14733285.2014.979134>.
- Holton, M., and M. Riley. 2013. Student geographies: exploring the diverse geographies of students and higher education. *Geography Compass* 7 (1):61–74.

- Hopkins, P. 2011. Towards critical geographies of the university campus: understanding the contested experiences of Muslim students. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (1):157–169.
- Hopkins, P., E. Olson, M. Baillie Smith, and N. Laurie. 2015. Transitions to religious adulthood: relational geographies of youth, religion and international volunteering. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40 (3):387–398.
- Horschelmann, K., and A. Stenning. 2008. Ethnographies of postsocialist change. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (3):339–361.
- Jamieson, L., and S. Milne. 2012. Children and young people’s relationships, relational processes and social change: reading across worlds. *Children’s Geographies* 10 (3):265–278.
- Jeffrey, C. 2012. Geographies of children and youth III: alchemists of the revolution? *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (1):145–152.
- . 2011. Geographies of children and youth II: global youth agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2):245–253.
- . 2010a. Geographies of children and youth I: eroding maps of life. *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (4):496–505.
- . 2010b. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- . 2010c. Timepass: youth, class, and time among unemployed young men in India. *American Ethnologist* 37 (3):465–481.
- . 2008a. ‘Generation Nowhere’: rethinking youth through the lens of unemployed young men. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (6):739–758.
- . 2008b. Kicking away the ladder: student politics and the making of an Indian middle class. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (3):517–536.
- Jeffrey, C., and J. Dyson. 2014. “I serve therefore I am”: youth and generative politics in India. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56 (4):967–994.
- . 2008. *Telling Young Lives: Portraits in Global Youth*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Jeffrey, C., P. Jeffery, and R. Jeffery. 2005. Reproducing difference? Schooling, jobs, and empowerment in Uttar Pradesh, India. *World Development* 33 (12):2085–2101.
- . 2004. “‘A useless thing!’” or “‘nectar of the gods?’” The cultural production of education and young men’s struggles for respect in liberalizing North India. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94 (4):961–981.

- Jeffrey, C., and L. McDowell. 2004. Youth in a comparative perspective: global change, local lives. *Youth & Society* 36 (2):131–142.
- Jeffrey, C., and C. McFarlane. 2008. Performing cosmopolitanism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (3):420–427.
- Johnson-Hanks, J. 2002. On the limits of life stages in ethnography: toward a theory of vital conjunctures. *American Anthropologist* 104 (3):865-880.
- Johnston, R., D. Wilson, and S. Burgess. 2007. Ethnic segregation and educational performance at secondary school in Bradford and Leicester, *Environment and Planning A* 39 (3):609-629.
- Kallio, K. P., and J. Häkli. 2013. Children and young people's politics in everyday life. *Space and Polity* 17 (1):1–16.
- . 2011. Tracing children's politics. *Political Geography* 30 (2):99–109.
- Katz, C. 2008. Childhood as spectacle : relays of anxiety and the reconfiguration of the child. *Cultural Geographies* 15 (1):5–17.
- . 2004: Growing up global: economic restructuring and children's everyday lives. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press.
- Kipnis, A. B. 2011. Subjectification and education for quality in China. *Economy and Society* 40 (2):289–306.
- . 2007. Neoliberalism reified: suzhi discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2):383–400.
- . 2001. Articulating school countercultures. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 32 (4):472–492.
- Kraftl, P. 2015. Alter-childhoods: biopolitics and childhoods in alternative education spaces. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (1):219–237.
- . 2013. Beyond “voice”, beyond “agency”, beyond “politics”? Hybrid childhoods and some critical reflections on children's emotional geographies. *Emotion, Space and Society* 9:13–23.
- . 2008. Young people, hope, and childhood-hope. *Space and Culture* 11 (2):81–92.
- Lahire, B. 2011. *The Plural Actor*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Larner, W. 2009. Neoliberalism. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. R. Kitchin and N. Thrift, 374-278. London: Elsevier.
- . 2000: Neo-liberalism: policy, ideology, governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy* 63:5–25.

- Laurie, N. 2012. Towards a comparative ethnography in geography? *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102 (2):500–502.
- Laurier, E., and C. Philo. 2006. Cold shoulders and napkins handed: gestures of responsibility. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (2):193–207.
- Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawson, V. 2009. Instead of radical geography, how about caring geography? *Antipode* 41 (1):210–213.
- Lee, R. 2006. The ordinary economy: tangled up in values and geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (4):413–432.
- Levinson, B. A., D. E. Foley, and D. C. Holland. 1996. *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Liu, F. 2008. Constructing the autonomous middle-class self in today's China: the case of young-adult only-children university students. *Journal of Youth Studies* 11 (2):193–212.
- Lynch, K., M. Lyons, and S. Cantillon. 2007. Breaking silence: educating citizens for love, care and solidarity. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 17 (1-2):1–19.
- Madge, C., P. Raghuram, and P. Noxolo. 2014. Conceptualizing international education: from international student to international study. *Progress in Human Geography* Advanced online publication: <http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0309132514526442>.
- Marcus, G. E., and M. Fisher. 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Marginson, S. 2010. Higher education in East Asia and Singapore: rise of the Confucian model. *Higher Education* 61 (5):587–611.
- Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London: Routledge.
- Mills, C. W. 1963. *Power, Politics, and People*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, S. 2015. Geographies of youth work, volunteering and employment: the Jewish lads' brigade and club in post-war Manchester. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40 (4):523–535.
- . 2013. “An instruction in good citizenship”: scouting and the historical geographies of citizenship education. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (1):120–134.

- Mitchell, K. 2007. Geographies of identity: the intimate cosmopolitan. *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (5):706–720.
- . 2006. Neoliberal governmentality in the European Union: education, training, and technologies of citizenship. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (3):389–407.
- . 2003. Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (4):387–403.
- Mok, K. H. 2009. The growing importance of the privateness in education: challenges for higher education governance in China. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 39 (1):35–49.
- . 2003. Globalisation and higher education restructuring in Hong Kong , Taiwan and Mainland China. *Higher Education Research & Development* 22 (2):117–129.
- Mok, K. H., and K. M. Yu. 2011. The quest for regional education hub status and transnational higher education : challenges for managing human capital in Asia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 31 (3):229–248.
- Naidoo, V. 2008. Transnational higher education: a stock take of current activity. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 13 (3):310–330.
- Ng, P. T. 2011. Singapore’s response to the global war for talent: politics and education. *International Journal of Educational Development* 31 (3):262–268.
- Olds, K. 2007. Global assemblage: Singapore, foreign universities, and the construction of a “global education hub.” *World Development* 35 (6):959–975.
- Olson, E. 2015. Geography and ethics II: emotions and morality. *Progress in Human Geography* Advanced online publication:  
<http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0309132515601766>
- Ong, A. 2007. Neoliberalism as a mobile technology. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (1):3–8.
- . *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. US: Duke University Press.
- Ortner, S. B. 2005. Subjectivity and cultural critique. *Anthropological Theory* 5 (1):31–52.
- O’Malley, P., L. Weir, and C. Shearing. 1997. Governmentality, criticism, politics. *Economy and Society* 26: 501–517.
- Peck, J., and N. Theodore. 2012. Reanimating neoliberalism: process geographies of neoliberalisation. *Social Anthropology* 20 (2):177–185.

- Peters, M. 2001. Education, enterprise culture and the entrepreneurial self: a Foucauldian perspective. *Journal of Educational Enquiry* 2 (2):58–71.
- Philo, C., 2011. Foucault, sexuality and when not to listen to children. *Children's Geographies* 9 (2):123–127.
- Philo, C., and F. M. Smith. 2003. Guest editorial: political geographies of children and young people. *Space and Polity* 7 (2):99–115.
- Pykett, J. 2010. Introduction: the pedagogical state: education, citizenship, governing. *Citizenship Studies* 14 (6):617–619.
- Radcliffe, S., and A. Webb. 2014. Mapuche youth between exclusion and the future: protest, civic society and participation in Chile. *Children's Geographies* Advanced online publication:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14733285.2014.964667>.
- Reay, D., G. Crozier, and J. Clayton. 2009. “Strangers in paradise”? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology* 43 (6):1103–1121.
- Reh, S., K. Rabenstein, and B. Fritzsche. 2011. Learning spaces without boundaries? Territories, power and how schools regulate learning. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (1):83–98.
- Rizvi, F. 2009. Towards cosmopolitan learning. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 30 (3):253–268.
- Rorty, R. 1996. The ambiguity of ‘rationality’. *Constellations* 3(1):73–82.
- Rouse, J. 2007. Social practices and normativity. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 37(1):46–56.
- Ruddick, S. 2003. The politics of aging: globalization and the restructuring of youth and childhood. *Antipode* 35 (2):334–362.
- Sayer, A. 2005. Class, moral worth and recognition. *Sociology* 39 (5):947–963.
- Shumar, W. 1997. *College for Sale: a Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education*. London: Falmer Press.
- Simons, M. 2006. Learning as investment: notes on governmentality and biopolitics. *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 38 (4):523–540.
- Skeggs, B. 2011. Imagining personhood differently: person value and autonomist working-class value practices. *Sociological Review* 59 (3):496–513.
- Skelton, T. 2010. Taking young people as political actors seriously: opening the borders of political geography. *Area* 42 (2):145–151.
- . 2009. Children's geographies/geographies of children: play, work, mobilities and migration. *Geography Compass* 3 (4):1430–1448.

- . 2007. Children, young people, UNICEF and participation. *Children's Geographies* 5 (1-2):165–181.
- Skelton, T., and G. Valentine. 2002. Towards home and school inclusion for young D/deaf people: ways forward, *Youth Policy: A Journal of Critical Analysis* 76:15-28.
- Smith, S. H. 2012. "In the heart, there's nothing": unruly youth, generational vertigo and territory. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (4):572–585.
- Smith, S. J. 2005. States, markets and an ethic of care. *Political Geography* 24 (1):1–20.
- Staheli, L. A., P. Ehrkamp, H. Leitner, and C. R. Nagel. 2012. Dreaming the ordinary: daily life and the complex geographies of citizenship. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (5):628–644.
- Sukarieh, M., and S. Tannock. 2014. *Youth Uprising? The Politics of Youth in the Global Economy*. London: Routledge.
- Sykes, K. 2009. *Ethnographies of Moral Reasoning: Living Paradoxes of a Global Age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thiem, C. H. 2008. Thinking through education: the geographies of contemporary educational restructuring. *Progress in Human Geography* 33 (2):154–173.
- Tikly, L. 2001. Globalisation and education in the post- colonial world: Towards a conceptual framework. *Comparative Education* 37 (2):51–171.
- Trnka, S., and C. Trundle. 2014. Competing responsibilities: moving beyond neoliberal responsibilisation. *Anthropological Forum* 24 (2):136–153.
- UNESCO. 2014. Higher education in Asia: expanding out, expanding up: the rise of graduate education and university research. Available: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/higher-education-asia-graduate-university-research-2014-en.pdf> [Accessed on 15 August 2015]
- Urciuoli, B. 2010. Neoliberal education: preparing students for new workplace. In *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism*, ed. C. Greenhouse, 162–176. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Valentine, G., 2008. The ties that bind: towards geographies of intimacy. *Geography Compass* 2 (6):2097-2110.
- . 2003. Boundary crossings: transitions from childhood to adulthood. *Children's Geographies* 1 (1):37–52.
- Waters, J. L. 2006. Emergent geographies of international education and social exclusion. *Antipode* 38 (5):1046–1068.
- Waters, J. L., and R. Brooks. 2011. International/transnational spaces of education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 9 (2):155–160.

- Waters, J. L., and M. Leung. 2014. "These are not the best students": continuing education, transnationalisation and Hong Kong's young adult "educational non-elite." *Children's Geographies* 12 (1):56–69.
- Waters, J. L., R. Brooks, and H. Pimlott-Wilson. 2011. Youthful escapes? British students, overseas education and the pursuit of happiness. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (5):455–469.
- Weis, L. 1990. *Working Class without Work: High School Studies in a De-industrializing Economy*. New York: Routledge.
- Weller, S. 2010. Young people's social capital: complex identities, dynamic networks. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33 (5):872–888.
- Willis, P. 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wood, N., and S. J. Smith. 2008. Pragmatism and geography. *Geoforum* 39:1527–1529.
- Woronov, T. E. 2011. Learning to serve: urban youth, vocational schools and new class formations in China. *The China Journal* 66:77–99.
- Worth, N. 2009. Understanding youth transition as "becoming": identity, time and futurity. *Geoforum* 40 (6):1050–1060.
- Yan, H. 2003. Neoliberal governmentality and neohumanism: organizing suzhi/value flow through labor recruitment networks. *Cultural Anthropology* 18 (4):493–523.
- Yon, D. A. 2003. Highlights and overview of the history of educational ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (1):411–429.
- Yoon, K. 2014. Transnational youth mobility in the neoliberal economy of experience. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (8):1014–1028.
- Zeilig, L., and N. Ansell. 2008. Spaces and scales of African student activism: Senegalese and Zimbabwean university students at the intersection of campus, nation and globe. *Antipode* 40 (1):31–54.
- Zembylas, M. 2013. Mobilizing "implicit activism" in schools through practices of critical emotional reflexivity. 24 (1):84–96.

## **Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The ethnography that informs this research is qualitative and inductive-deductive in nature: it seeks to generate “bottom-up” accounts of young lives in a manner that is informed by and contributes to theoretical refinements, as opposed to explaining a certain social phenomenon based on abstract theories. My research is designed to explore young people (used interchangeably with the term “youth”) as knowledgeable actors: their voices and practices serve as an interpretive lens to understand the broader processes of globalisation and neoliberal change. This interpretive approach, as Ley (1988, 121) wrote, “attempts to make sense of their making sense of the events and opportunities confronting them in everyday life”. By doing so, I privileged the social worlds of a particular group of people in a way that simultaneously aggregates their experiences and allows for multiple voices and perspectives. It is the production of partial knowledge from a specific location – what Haraway (1988) called “situated knowledges”. With these theoretical underpinnings in mind, I proceed to discuss the methodological route from case selection to fieldwork practices and finally representational framing. In doing so, I hope to engage with “ethnography as a way of being, seeing, thinking and writing” (Mills and Morton 2013, 3).

### **Ethnographic Case**

Singapore offers a distinctive case of state-led neoliberal economic development and globalisation, represented by its flexible adoption of neoliberal economic policies and political rationalities (Liow 2011; Yeung 2000). The Singaporean state’s flexible engagement with neoliberalism is informed by an ideological stance of pragmatism engraved into the political philosophy since its early founding days in order to safeguard economic growth and national survival (Chua 1995). As such, the globalising city-state of Singapore provides an illuminating ethnographic context to examine the contemporary

neoliberal politics of youth citizenship as a shifting, but historically produced state project; one that has been deeply concerned with the prudent calibration of state policies and human capital formation since its birth as a nation-state. As Gopinathan (2007) remarked, “education reform in Singapore is primarily a way of retooling the productive capacity of the system”. The educational landscape in the present day is the result of a carefully planned program to invest in human capital and to “school the nation” after independence. What is striking about the Singaporean education context is the highly centralised and integrated system, with an enduring emphasis by the state on regulating educational policies in a manner that ensure neoliberal-style optimal productivity and efficiency of its labour force. It is in this sense that Singapore represents what Pykett (2010, 617) calls the “pedagogical state”, a term that casts the analytic lens on those “pedagogic strategies employed to govern citizens, both within and outside the formal education sphere”. In order to grasp better the implications of neoliberal politics on middle-class citizenship reproduction in higher education, the political-economic and historically produced cultural rationalities surround the broader education system needs to be more fully elaborated on.

### ***The Singaporean context***

Concerned with a haphazard education landscape passed down by its colonial predecessor, the Singaporean government took on the task of centralising the national education system in the early 1960s, primarily through a rhetoric of “crisis and survival” driven by the goals of nation-building and economic development.<sup>1</sup> The education system inherited in the wake of independence was plagued by large achievement gaps between the ethnic Chinese population on the one hand, and the Malay and Indian populations on the other hand. The ruling government saw this as a stumbling block to nation-building as well as economic development. The education system was replaced by a universal state-funded system resting on the principle of equal access rather than that of discrimination along the lines of ethnicity

and religion. A series of major changes took place across the 1970s, including the merger of different ethnic-based vernacular educational streams into a single national system held together by a bilingual education policy; the rapid building of schooling infrastructure and large scale recruitment of teachers; and investment in vocational and technical education in order to match the then rapidly industrialising economy.

By the early 1980s, Singapore has become a newly industrialised economy and was faced with the challenge of upgrading the industries in order to remain economically competitive in the region. The “one-size-fits-all” education system at that time was unable to produce a labour force with skills that match those required by the evolving economy. There was also a growing concern over large numbers of premature school leavers and failures in the late 1970s; “only 29% of each primary one cohort progressed to secondary school, with 14% surviving to the pre-university level, and 9% eventually enrolling in universities or polytechnics” (Tan 2010, 404). The government then adopted an efficiency-driven model of education based on a streaming and tracking system, whereby students were being grouped by their different academic abilities, with the aim of creating a more differentiated system for students to learn and develop at their own pace. What this also meant, however, was the emergence of a “conveyor belt” system that distributed students into the academic and vocational tracks based mainly on their academic performance – a keystone reform that remains deeply embedded in the present-day education system. It was during this period that the polytechnic sector strengthened in terms of its number and ties with industries. Further review of the economic and education policies in the late 1980s also led to the establishment of the Institute of Technical Education that provides a structured program of vocational training and education (Gopinathan 1999).

The 1990s saw a profound restructuring of the global economy that was driven by knowledge and innovation, leading to another round of educational reform. Most notably was the introduction of the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” initiative in 1997 with the key objective of nurturing a generation of school leavers with a whole new set of skills, including innovation, creativity and flexibility. Since its inception, “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” has become the guiding vision for the national education system, which describes “a nation of thinking and committed citizens capable of meeting the challenges of the future, and an education system geared to the needs of the 21st century”. The then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong asserted that this new vision “is a formula to enable Singapore to compete and stay ahead” (cited in Gopinathan 2007, 60) in the changing economy. Another watershed change was the passing of the Compulsory Education Act in 2000, which stated that a child is of compulsory school age when he/she reaches the age of six. National education continued to emphasise the importance of Singapore’s core (neo-Confucian) values, national belonging and identification, and civic commitments. Notable efforts have also been put into strategies that sought to preserve young educated Singaporeans’ loyalties and attachments, especially in the face of globalising cultures and opportunities. Throughout the 2000s, the elements of flexibility, choice, and autonomy continued to be pursued by the government and led to the development of new pathways such as the Integrated Program – a scheme that removes the need for high-performing students in elite secondary schools to sit the GCE O-level examination – as well as a more recently introduced counterpart scheme that offers students who have performed well in the GCE N-level examination to progress to polytechnics via faster routes (MOE 2010). At the tertiary level, polytechnics and universities also underwent major transformations, namely through the establishment of new networks, alliances and physical infrastructure, which are all part of the government’s aim to transform Singapore into an education hub via the Global Schoolhouse project (Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2011; Ng and Tan 2010).

Against the backdrop of these successive changes that were made to all levels of the national education landscape, the postcolonial ruling elite's project of "schooling the nation" and preserving close links between education and economy has been premised upon an ideology of meritocracy (Gopinathan 2007). After Singapore was separated from Malaysia in 1965, senior statesman Lee Kuan Yew saw the urgency for developing human capital through an emphasis on civic virtues such as talent, hard work and individual merit. In 1966, the government conducted a major review of the education content and syllabus at the secondary school level, such that the curriculum would be directed at producing desirable students who are "good citizen[s], robust, well-educated, skilled, and well-adjusted" (Lee Kuan Yew cited in Hill and Lian 1995, 81). Given that the political project was to mould Singapore into a "multiracial, non-communist, non-aligned, and democratic socialist state" (Chan 1991, 158), the egalitarian aspect of meritocracy served as an especially appealing foundation for governing the nation. Since then, meritocracy – broadly conceived "as a practice that rewards individual merit with social rank, job positions, higher incomes, or general recognition and prestige" by giving "all potentially qualified and deserving individuals an equal and fair chance of achieving success" (Tan 2008, 8) – has remained a cornerstone philosophy of the ruling government. Under this principle, the ideal system by which individuals can earn their place in the society is through a system of "merit" that would be measured by grades at school and university (and performance in the workplace). What ensued after the creation of this "brave new meritocracy" was a series of "incremental structural shifts in education policy... which made meritocracy part of the lived experience of generations of parents and children" (Barr and Skrbis 2008, 60).

The use of "meritocracy" as a guiding principle for policy formulation has led to a systematic entrenchment of the importance of educational achievement. Young people and parents place high premiums on education as it is seen as the key site through which social

mobility can be achieved or maintained. This is unsurprising given that Singapore's education system has made a significant contribution in transforming class stratification over the past decades (Chang 1995). But parallel to this heightened emphasis on educational achievement was also the intensification of the discourse of academic merit – that is merit based on academic performance. Since education is structured and marketed as a positional good, there is immense competition to outdo each other. This led to a situation where young people are made to push their limits and excel in their academic studies by schoolteachers and parents. At the same time, parents (especially those of middle-class backgrounds) also increasingly feel a responsibility to help their children accumulate various forms of social and cultural capital that would improve their chances at becoming “good” students. In addition to academic excellence, young people are encouraged to become all-rounders who are able to accumulate achievements in extra-curricular activities. Ironically, while this can be seen as a shift away from an over-emphasis on academic merit in defining children's potential and ability, the consequences are often translated into parental anxieties over an intensification of investments, such as private tuition and enrichment classes, that are required to ensure the child retains positional advantage. This highly competitive and stressful environment has led to the emergence of the culture of *kiasu* (Hokkien phrase meaning the fear of losing), a widely-known national characteristic of Singaporeans (see Barr and Skrbiš 2008). This distinctive cultural character of Singaporean citizens denotes a habitus for accumulation aimed at preserving a measure of status position, worth, and value so as not to “lose” to others.

While the government continues to grapple with the slippery concepts of “fairness” and “equality” in their vision of meritocratic educational provision, the contradiction between meritocracy's elitist and egalitarian dimensions is already unravelling at level of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> In 2011, senior statesman Lee Kuan Yew commented that more than half of the

students at Raffles Institution, one of the top performing schools in Singapore, had parents who are university graduates and of high socio-economic backgrounds. This is in contrast to 13.1 per cent of students with university-educated parents at another non-elite mainstream secondary school (Chang 2011). Lee's speech hit the news and was being circulated on Internet forums and social media, which quickly led to passionate discussions around the topic of social mobility and educational inequality. The revelation of such stark contrast in the socio-economic background of students between elite and mainstream schools added fuel to many Singaporeans' ongoing unhappiness with the government's perpetuation of elitism through its economic-driven policies. As "ordinary Singaporeans are becoming more conscious of socio-economic inequalities, the barriers to fair competition, and their divergent life chances in a global city" (Tan 2008, 11), the government is also raising its efforts to strengthen its legitimacy among a more critical generation of Singaporeans. A host of policy initiatives have been implemented since 2004 to soften the rigidity of the education system's streaming and tracking approach, such as the Direct School Admissions exercise that allows schools, junior colleges, and polytechnics to practise autonomy in providing preferential admission to a fixed percentage of students based on non-academic achievements. Even more recently, the Ministry of Education introduced a new aim under the rubric of "Every School A Good School" in order to mark its commitment to tackle growing anxieties around unequal opportunities in the schooling landscape. Although these policy initiatives signal attempts to break away from an educational model that encourages the tracking of talents and the unequal distribution of rewards, it has been argued that "the piecemeal manner of their conception and implementation would ultimately prove insufficient in engendering a common commitment towards meritocracy" as long as "individuals' social mobility continues to be indexed by their educational attainment" (Lim 2013, 6).

Indeed, there is now a hegemonic understanding of university education credentials as the minimum basis for young people to achieve upward mobility or to maintain their middle-class positions. The valorisation of credentials as the cultural currency in a modern capitalist society like Singapore is closely connected to the bureaucratisation of recruitment practices, which led to a systematic transformation in the way labouring bodies are sorted accordingly to educational certification. This is accompanied by a growth in demand for credentials among the expanding middle classes since the 1970s, whereby the pursuit of education is geared towards the goal of securing a job in the Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians (PMET) sector (Chang 1995). By the 1990s, and in conjunction with the state-led emphasis on knowledge and innovation economies, Singapore was already resembling Collins's (1979) description of the western capitalist "credential society", whereby individuals who are able to secure prestigious credentials will more or less be assured of employment opportunities in large corporations and public offices. In addition, the deeply embedded ideology of meritocracy that framed formal education as the best mechanism for sorting individuals into different segments of the labour market further entrenched educated youth's interests to participate in the "paper chase". For many of these young people, whether they come from junior colleges, polytechnics, or technical education institutes, there is an aspiration to attend university and get a degree (Davie 2012).

Even as educational aspirations and desires remain strong among the current generation of Singaporean young people, global economic change has also brought about what Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) called "social congestion", where the persistent scramble for degree credentials has led to a tightening graduate labour market for middle-class jobs. The economic downturn in the late 2000s shored up a new wave of anxieties around job opportunities and material wellbeing that was unfamiliar to previous generations who thrived under the "Asian Miracle" in the 1990s. Graduate youth un/under-employment –

while considerably low as compared to other parts of the world – became a concern for many university-educated youth, who were finding it increasingly difficult to enter the full-time labour market immediately upon graduation. According to a Graduate Employment Survey published by the Ministry of Education (MOE 2014b), which is a compilation of respective surveys conducted by the National University of Singapore, the Nanyang Technological University, and the Singapore Management University, it took about 6 months for graduates to find full-time employment in 2013. Although 8 out of 10 graduates were able to secure jobs within this period of time, the full-time employment rate for graduates holding degrees such as Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, Sports Science, and Bioengineering fell below 70 per cent, with the lowest employment rate at 53.6 per cent. The tightening of the graduate labour market has meant that a growing number of highly educated youth were taking up temporary positions and short-term contract jobs, and sometimes accepting lower wages in order to secure employment. Youth concerns with the perceived lack of opportunities for social mobility were further compounded by a rising cost of living, disproportionate increase in wages, as well as competition from highly skilled immigrant workers and students, i.e. “foreign talent” (see Yang 2014) entering Singapore via its open-door immigration policy.

The extent to which social reproduction has taken a toll on young people’s lives is perhaps most visibly noted in the Singapore General Elections 2011, where the ruling People’s Action Party saw an unprecedented vote swing towards oppositional parties by about 7 per cent since the previous elections. While the Party kept 60 per cent of the votes, this figure is the lowest since post-independence. In what is now called the “watershed election”, about 25 per cent of the 2.2 million voters were between the ages of 21 and 35 – a generation of youth who are internet-savvy, highly-educated, and critical of the hard-handed style of government that is characteristic of the ruling party (Ortmann 2011; Chong 2012).

Singaporean young people have turned to online platforms and communities to air their frustrations and worries about pressing socio-economic conditions. One example is a locally initiated online portal, *transitioning.org*, founded in 2009 in the wake of the economic crisis to provide some form of online community support for Singaporeans who were unable to secure jobs smoothly upon graduation. Amidst the numerous forum letters published on the website were some striking headlines that illustrate a degree of skepticism and disenchantment around the situation: “Generation Y female PMET jobless despite graduating from elite JC and local uni”; “Jobless young SMU graduate stucked and feeling desperate”; “Jobless young fine arts honours graduate feeling the blues”; and “Young jobless NUS graduate in banking sector unsure about career option”. Unfortunately, many of these frustrations are often channelled toward the “foreign talent” and “foreign scholar” bodies, constructing them as ‘stealers’ of local jobs and opportunities.

Commenting on the global economic crisis and future of Asian economies, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam (cited in Wong 2014) said that in order for Singapore to become a “truly advanced economy”, restructuring of industries have to be “driven by market forces and entrepreneurial innovation”, which depends on a fundamental transformation of “social culture” with “disruptive players” in every sector of the economy. He urged that this process “has to be more intrinsic” and with that mindset that “I have to be the master of what I am doing, whatever it is.” In a separate speech given by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong (2010), young Singaporeans were reminded to combine “soft skills with ruggedness” because the nation needs “Singaporeans who are rugged”, rather than a generation of young people who are “fragile like strawberries”. This alludes to the term “strawberry generation”, which describes the fragility of post-1980s children who grew up in middle class, affluent environments and are unable to withstand hardship. The minister’s reminder reflects a broader concern about the current generation of Singaporeans

being complacent and taking for granted the peace, economic prosperity, and stability that the nation-state has enjoyed over the last two decades. Contemporary youth in Singapore are not only incited to become resourceful and resilient self-activated citizens, but that as future leaders of the nation-state they too bear the weight of maintaining the nation-state's global positioning. Governmental speeches like these reflect the state promotion of a neoliberal ethos among its citizens, an "ethos of "empowering" individuals as risk-bearing subjects and of unleashing the power of the markets to order human affairs" (Anagnost 2013, 12).

### *Fieldwork locus*

The decision to locate my research in Singapore was not only informed by the city-state's potential to shed light on neoliberal politics around education and youth citizenship. It also reflected my longstanding association and cultural familiarity with the place. I have spent my childhood and adolescent life in Singapore, moving through the education system from primary and secondary school to college and then university until 2012, when I left the country for postgraduate study. In the same year that I left Singapore, the higher education landscape was beginning to go through a major restructuring under the government's newly announced university expansion plan. It was also a period when Singaporeans were becoming ever more vocal about issues around class, elitism, and inequality in the city. Access to higher education, getting degree credentials from "good" (i.e. public) universities, and securing acceptable middle-class jobs were issues that escalated into national concerns. Amidst these, the local news also drew attention to an expanding segment of middle-class Singaporeans pursuing degree education at local private institutes of higher education. According to reports, the private degree student population is relatively young, with half of them between the ages of 21 and 25. These are young people who have completed their A level or diploma studies, but were unable to secure places in the somewhat more established

and reputable public universities – namely the National University of Singapore, the Nanyang Technological University, and the Singapore Management University. For them, private higher education offers an alternative pathway to obtain a degree that is relatively more affordable than going abroad (*The Straits Times* 17 Oct 2011; 8 Jun 2012; 4 Sep 2014; *The Sunday Times* 20 Jul 2014).<sup>3</sup> As a young person who had learned the importance of educational achievement and who had successfully gained a place in a public university in the same city-state, I became intrigued by this private degree phenomenon. How do these students who take a different educational path understand education and negotiate its constraints and opportunities?

Private higher education in contemporary Singapore provides a novel site to investigate neoliberal educational change and middle-class citizenship reproduction. As underlined in the survey of literature, there is a paucity of ethnographic research on non-elite higher education, and that these institutes have remained relatively absent within contemporary accounts on the neoliberal globalisation of higher education and student lives. The burgeoning private higher education sector in the city-state is one prime example of this “underbelly”, and it serves as an empirically and theoretically coherent field for studying non-elite expressions of youth citizenship in globalising education spaces. Since the 1990s, tertiary/higher education in the city has undergone major reforms as part of the government’s aim to transform Singapore into a global education hub (Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2011; Collins et al. 2014). In addition to transforming the local public universities into global centres of research and innovation excellence, the government also encouraged the privatisation of higher education by attracting new players into the educational market (Waring 2013). Despite this rapid growth of the private education sector in Singapore, it remained somewhat invisible within the broader mainstream state and public discourse

around higher learning. It was only in the early 2000s when vernacular terms like “private degree education” and “private degree student” started to emerge.

The private degree phenomenon came into view at a nation-wide level due to increased media coverage on the closure of several private universities, such as the University of New South Wales, and incidents around fake “degree mills”. In a bid to ameliorate this situation, the Council of Private Education, a government statutory board, was set up in 2009 to regulate the sector and to safeguard the quality of private educational programmes, mainly through a process of accreditation. There has also been a rapidly expanding student population enrolled into private degree education. According to the Council of Private Education, there were more than 100,000 Singaporeans pursuing degree and diploma studies across 71 private educational institutes in Singapore. By 2012, there was already an estimated 47,500 Singaporeans enrolled in full-time and part-time undergraduate degree programmes in the city’s four largest private institutes. This sizeable student population has grown to match the number of Singaporeans enrolled into the local public universities, which was estimated to be just over 45,000 in the same year. In the last few years, the participation rate at public universities has been strategically increased from 25 per cent in 2012 to 30 per cent in 2014. The government has declared that the cap would be gradually increased to 40 per cent by 2020. This recalibration would open up a total of 16,000 undergraduate degree places for each intake. The change was implemented as part of the government’s university expansion programme to cater to the growing aspirations of Singaporeans for higher education, but at the same time in a manner that avoids consequences, such as “high attrition rates, reduced graduate employability and a dilution in the value of university degrees”, that have hit many countries in Europe, North America and Asia (MOE 2012b, 4).

Within this ongoing university expansion programme, the government also acknowledged that private educational institutes “play a role in complementing the public university sector, by injecting greater course diversity and supporting workforce development” (MOE 2012b, 9). Among the 47,500 students enrolled in the four largest institutions, about 30,000 were concentrated in one single private institute in the city. This particular institute caters to fresh A-level and diploma graduates, as well as to working-adults who wish to upgrade their existing credentials through short-term upgrading programs. It offers both part-time and full-time degree programs spanning across social sciences to business and marketing, through a mixture of locally certified degree courses as well as transnational degree programs in partnership with overseas universities. These two kinds of degree programs are housed under separate units – the “local” and the “global” arm. The local arm oversees all locally certified degree programs and only offered part-time courses for working adults in the form of “upgrading” courses. But since 2014, the local arm started to offer a handful of full-time degree courses that are fully subsidised by the government under the university expansion project. The institute’s global arm manages all part-time and full-time transnational degree programs, offering a wide array of overseas credentials from reputable partner universities, such the University of London from the UK, the University of Buffalo from the States, and the RMIT from Australia. Despite this eclectic array of programs, the institute’s chief mission is to offer educational programs aimed at cultivating employable and industry-ready professional workers – a vision that that can be traced to the institute’s origin as a pioneering vocational training centre in Singapore. Since 2012, the institute actively promoted newly introduced applied degree programmes and intensified its marketing messages centred around a focus on imparting industry-relevant knowledge and professional skills to students. Emphasis was given to preparing students for a “head start” in their career and an “edge” in the prevailing competitive job market. These messages have

been featured prominently on the institute's website (“Get an edge in today's competitive job market”/”Get a head start in your career”).

This institute, hereafter called the Singapore Private Institute (SPI), has been selected as the case study for my ethnographic research. Although SPI's local arm now been restructured into one of Singapore's new public universities since late 2014, the institute remains as a relevant case of private higher education. This is because the establishment continues to be managed as a private institution, and that none of the students involved in my research were enrolled into these newly implemented programs at that point of time. SPI serves as an intrinsic case study to explore a specific set of cultural practices around educational privatisation and marketisation, given its tremendous success in attracting the bulk of degree-seeking young people within private higher education. But as Stake (1995) pointed out, an intrinsic case study can also be instrumental in nature, with a purpose for gaining insight into theoretical issues. In this aspect, SPI represents a case of non-elite educated youth reproducing middle-class citizenship within a particular staging of neoliberal imaginary. As such, the case study provides a basis to generalise by using the “force of example” to re-evaluate theoretical formulations about those broader processes (Flyvbjerg 2006, 228). Conceptualised as a locus of analysis, the case of SPI can be read alongside other case studies on (non-elite) middle-class youth who face similar educational restructuring processes (e.g. Waters and Leung 2012), albeit in disparate locations, to produce what Katz (2001, 1219) calls a “topography of globalisation”. The notion of “locus” is deliberately employed to dissolve the dualisms between the particular and the general; it is especially useful for imagining the fieldwork location as a particular point within a wider constellation of social fields (see Castree 2005; Massey 2005).

The pseudonym Singapore Private Institute has been given to the institute for the purpose of anonymity. My access to the campus was granted by one of SPI's programme directors, under the informed consent that I do not use the actual name of the institute. I had emailed a number of key personnel at SPI, including programme directors and head of departments, as my first step of gaining access. However, none of my emails received any replies. I then turned to LinkedIn, a professional social networking website, to source for potential leads. Within my extended friendship network, I chanced upon an SPI student with first-hand connection to one of the programme directors. I contacted him with the hope of reaching the director via his connection. The student, who was president of the council that represented his degree programme, was excited about my research and arranged for me to get in touch with the director on LinkedIn. This encounter eventually landed me an opportunity to meet the director at SPI. During our meeting, it was agreed that anonymity is difficult to maintain given that my fieldwork is based on a single case and SPI is a widely known private institute in the city. In this instance, the act of presenting contextual description of the institute as a way to establish the appropriateness of research site can render its identity apparent and traceable (Walford 2001). Therefore, we arrived at the consensus that I do not hold or present any data that breaches the confidentiality of SPI. Any information about the institute that I wish to obtain should be publicly accessed through its website, newspaper reports, and other online sources. This has limited my access to information such as the precise number of students enrolled by degree courses, their previous educational backgrounds, and the ethnic composition of the student population. Although this information is valuable for constructing a broader view of the student background at SPI, it is not vital to the interpretive approach that informed my methodology. My priority was to ensure maximum privacy and confidentiality of the student participants in my research. To this end, another ethical concern about the adoption of a pseudonym for fieldwork location is to protect the research subjects' identities (Walford 2005). But the sheer student

population at SPI added a layer of concealment to the identities of my research participants, even if the institute cannot be fully anonymised.

### *Sampling of students*

The students at SPI that formed the core of my research is a group of young Singaporean men and women between the ages of 18 and 25, who were pursuing their first undergraduate degrees during the period of my fieldwork between 2013 and 2014. The process that led to this selected focus is informed by the concept of purposive sampling (Patton 1990). Purposive sampling does not seek to generate a case that is representative of the whole population in a given context. Instead, it is a purposeful building of an information-rich sample that helps to elucidate the research question.

My research is centrally interested in how young people's perceptions of a degree education are enmeshed within a neoliberal politics of middle-class reproduction. I focused on students who were pursuing their first undergraduate degrees at SPI so as to establish a typical case of students based on common characteristics: all of them do not have previous experience of higher education, have not gained a degree prior to enrolment into SPI, and have strong motivations for wanting to secure a degree credential. But according to Patton (1990), the purpose of typical case sampling is to provide a basis for description and illustration, rather than to make generalisable or definite claims about the experiences of all the participants. By implication, the ages of students in my research were between 18 and 25, which corresponded with the dominant age group that constitutes the private degree student population. Within this sample, I also aimed to explore a variety of student narratives and practices for the purpose of enriching my ethnographic account through analysing for nuanced differences. To this end, I included students who were enrolled into different degree programs by disciplines and by the partner universities for those who

studied in SPI's global arm. And because wider geographic scholarship on middle-class reproduction on higher education has tended to neglect gender as an axis of difference, I periodically tracked the number of male and female students whom I encountered during fieldwork in order to ensure a good balance of gender representation within the sample.

Apart from this purposeful sampling of students, a general principle of inclusiveness and openness was adopted with regards to whom I interact with during fieldwork. However, many of the students I encountered and spoke with on campus were ethnic Chinese. I came across four young Malay men and women, who later became my formal interviewees. I also informally chatted with several Indian students, but only one had stayed in contact with me. It was also difficult for me to decide on an "acceptable" number of non-ethnic Chinese to speak based on the ethnic profile of the student population at SPI due to my lack of information in this area. Hence, I relied heavily on personal contacts, opportunistic encounters, and the snowballing technique during fieldwork that ultimately led to a profile of students that is dominantly represented by ethnic Chinese. Although this does limit the extent to which my ethnographic materials can shed light on student experiences from the angle of ethnic/racial difference, it does not dilute the overall richness and rigour of the study.

### **Navigating the "field"**

As an embodied practice, ethnography uniquely emphasises the researcher as imbricated in the "field". This raises two interrelated issues that need to be addressed as part of developing a clear and transparent account of my ethnographic case. First, there has to be an explicit acknowledgement that research relationships are always also social relationships (Mills and Morton 2013). This implies that the researcher has to confront those tensions or dilemmas, even if they are ostensibly banal ones, which has to do with ordinary human

interactions and interpersonal relationships. The second issue revolves around the introspective dimension of ethnographic fieldwork, or what has been termed “autoethnographic” narrative. Rather than viewing these ruminations as “confessional tales” (Van Maanen 1988, 96) that are “over-indulgent”, they should be recognised as a reflexive strategy to “articulate the conditions in which we construct geographic knowledge, and provide insight into the characteristics of the knowledge that results” (Butz and Besio 2009, 1667). These considerations also reflect my inclinations to think critically with feminist geographical epistemologies, such as those of situated knowledges, politics of location, and emotional reflexivities (see Moss 2002), which have had a significant influence on my research practices. In this section, I offer a meaningful discussion of methods as a set of techniques that requires the researcher to engage with situated strategies and negotiations during fieldwork. Additionally, I show how engaging with such ethnographic sensibility is vital to understanding the ways fieldwork relationships and encounters are inevitably shaped by and shaping the researcher’s way of knowing, seeing, and practising.

### ***Methods in practice***

I deployed a combination of methods in my ethnography that aimed to develop a coherent and rich understanding of student narratives and practices at SPI. These methods included hanging about, on-site observations, informal conversations, and formal in-depth interviews. They were used purposefully and interactively to build on each other’s strengths and limitations. Even as these methods were purposively selected prior to my entering into the field, their actual deployment has required constant reflections on their practicalities and ethical implications on the part of the researcher.

During the first month of my fieldwork, I depended on “hanging about” as a key method to familiarise myself with the campus environment, collect information about the institute

through leaflets and brochures, as well as to establish contacts. Here, I found it instructive to follow Woodward's (2008) distinction between the ideas of “hanging about” and “hanging out”. While the former denotes a way of “being around” and a degree of “insiderness”, the latter implies that the researcher can confidently claim that s/he has been accepted as a member of the community. In the first month, I visited SPI almost on a daily basis, alternating the timings during which I visit. On each visit, I spent about three hours walking around and sitting about in the campus. I observed for patterns in terms of how students passed their time during breaks and after classes, the places they hanged out within the campus, and the people they spent their time with. The bus stops just outside SPI were always packed with throngs of students every three hours from eight in the morning till five in the afternoon, indicating the “peak” timings at which students come into and leave SPI. Such information provided me with a sense of the day-to-day campus life at SPI. Being aware of the everyday rhythm of student life in campus is crucial to cultivating familiarity of how students use time and space within the educational environment. For instance, I observed that students utilised a range of spaces within SPI, notably corridor benches, canteens, and cafes, to revise academic work and to discuss tutorial assignments in a lighthearted manner.

As I continued to hang about in the campus after the initial month of focused on-site observation, I began to approach students opportunistically to strike up conversations. Informal conversation plays an integral role in helping the researcher understand the meanings behind observable actions and activities. It is also a way to create conversations that minimise discomfort and stress on the people, given they are not obliged to commit to the research. I avoided the “peak” timings when students were moving around, into, and out of the campus. The campus space at these times could be extremely challenging to navigate, given that SPI was just under 7.5 hectares before the completion of an ongoing campus

development project, a stark contrast to its adjacent 33.6 hectares polytechnic. I found it most sensible to approach students either before or after their classes, when they were often seen hanging out with peers, engaging in small group chats, and spending time in a leisurely manner. I also preferred to approach students who were hanging out in small groups for two practical reasons. First, it enabled me to converse with and obtain broad insights from multiple students at any one time. Second, I found it easier to talk to students in group settings for perhaps the reason that they felt more comfortable with their peers beside them. This, however, also presented some awkward moments when I was made to feel like an “intruder” into their group activities. On several occasions, I received a “dirty look” from some students who appeared to be annoyed by my intrusion. There were also times when students entered into a state of silence, started to look at their laptop screens, and ignored my presence after I introduced myself to them, as a way to indicate that I should leave them alone. On these situations, I typically put an end to the conversation and invited them to contact me on my email address or mobile number, if they were interested in continuing with the conversation.

The idea of taking up students’ time during ethnography became a perennial concern and ethical dilemma that I had to negotiate – an experience that contrasts with Jeffrey’s (2010) ethnographic work in India where young people were eager for the “distraction” of a foreign researcher. This was compounded by the emotional challenges of apprehension, fear of rejection and being ignored, and even the indignity of being given the “dirty look”. On the one hand, I would be perceived as disturbing the students if they were engaged in project discussions. On the other hand, I could also be seen as intrusive if the students were in the midst of a lively chat session. I had to learn to make intuitive judgements about the appropriate conditions under which striking up a conversation is deemed acceptable. Even after establishing a level of trust and rapport with many of the student informants at SPI,

they continued to see me as a researcher, as an “outsider” who has come to learn about their lives. This was unsurprising given that I was not immersed in their daily life in an “authentic” manner: attending hours of lectures, scrambling through tutorial assignments, and toiling through project works in the ways that they did. In a way that a student once described the plight and fate of private degree students at SPI as “we are all on the same boat”, I was never on that “same boat” with them to begin with.

While initiating conversations with students during first encounters can be challenging, some strategies have helped to lubricate the process. The most useful way was to ask existing contacts for opportunities to meet their friends. Many of the sustained informal conversations were a result of being acquainted with certain members of the friendship circle. They played the role of the middle person (or gatekeeper) who helped secure and prevent access to different groups of people. I was heavily dependent on their assistance in negotiating for “acceptable” times and places for me to meet up with groups of students on a recurring basis. These students were either sourced from my personal friends, who therefore saw their extended help as a gesture of goodwill, or those who took a great deal of interest in my research topic and hoped to learn something by being more actively involved in the research. As a token of appreciation, I always offered to buy them beverages whenever we met up. Another strategy that was useful when striking up a conversation was to prepare a short and simple survey form, which I only handed out to them after they have shown signs of willingness to talk to me. Students were intrigued when I presented them with a survey questionnaire, which sustained their attention while I tried to engage them into a conversation. The survey form fulfilled the purpose of “breaking ice” between the students and myself, rather than a technique for data collection. It acted as an instrument of elicitation. I also felt that presenting students with a survey form gave the impression that I was undertaking a purposeful project and not just wasting their time. But this did not stop

some of them from mistaking me as an insurance agent or a salesperson. I had even adopted the disclaimer “Don’t worry, I’m not selling you anything” before I say anything else to them!

My informal conversations with students coalesced around two broad types. There were the more frequent but unsustained, encounter-based informal conversations, which were useful for expanding social contacts and to explore new topics for discussion. I also used such conversations to confirm and disconfirm certain information previously established with other students. Although my encounters and conversations with these students were fleeting, these young people nevertheless constitute the interpretive community that helped shape the situated and relational formation of ethnographic knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The second type of informal conversations was more sustained and especially useful for exploring particular topics in greater depth. I have gained striking insights into the ways students understood and talked about, for instance, the role of friendship solidarities within private higher education, their somewhat collective disdain for elitism, and notions of equality and justice – themes that subsequently became critical to my analysis and discussion about the subtle politics that private degree students perform in the face of neoliberalising education.

After gaining a degree of capacity to comprehend the perspectives of students, I invited them to participate in formal interviews. A total of eighteen males (fifteen Chinese, two Malay, one Indian) and seventeen female students (fifteen Chinese, two Malay) were interviewed. These students were invited for interview based on a combination of reasons that emerged during fieldwork, which included the goal of maintaining a balanced gender representation, an attempt to explore the narratives of non-Chinese students in greater depth, and ensuring a mixture of students from different degree programs. While I mainly

recruited interviewees from students I have interacted with on campus as well as through their connections, the number of interviewees reached a bottleneck at the midpoint of fieldwork. I subsequently turned to putting up call for participants on the Internet via my personal WordPress blog, social networking site Facebook, and online bulletin boards. I conducted interviews that were semi-structured around pre-identified topics on schooling history, reasons to pursue degree education, personal goals in life, perceptions of Singapore's education system, and more specifically their opinions of private higher education. These topics were listed on an interview schedule that was used to guide my conversations with interviewees. The pre-identified topics served as a basis for ensuring a degree of consistency in the elicited narratives across interviews, while allowing students a considerable flexibility to describe their experiences. This consistency helps to facilitate analysis for themes and comparison (Baxter and Eyles 1997). The interview schedule was also subject to modification as new curiosities around specific themes emerge from ongoing interpretation of their experiences. Some of these additions included issues on employment, elitism, curricular learning, as well as ordinary definitions of class.

The use of formal interviews has allowed me to elicit in-depth narratives from students that cannot be achieved by the methods of observation and informal conversation. It is through interviewing that I was able to obtain detailed information such as students' personal backgrounds, unique stories about their educational journeys, and other emotional narratives that were difficult to talk about within the casual and often brief conversational moments. As an interpretive methodology, interviewing is tied to issues of ethics, power, and representation that require the researcher's careful negotiation, as well as to lessen the unequal power relationship between the "researcher" and the "researched" (McDowell 2010). At the most basic level, students who were interviewed did so under informed consent that the conversations would be audio-recorded, transcribed, and subject to being

quoted in possible publications. They were also given the option to choose their own nicknames or pseudonyms in the consent form (see Morrow 2008). Students sometimes asked for their actual names to be used, but I explained to them the importance of confidentiality in qualitative research with human subjects. In these cases, students wanted to be recognised as contributors towards the research but their voices had to be disguised for ethical reasons. The duration of interviewing also required ethical consideration. Based on previous experience of conducting interviews, I kept the duration to a maximum of ninety minutes so as to prevent “interview fatigue” and “colonising” the students’ time. As my interviews were open-ended in nature and students were given the autonomy to lead the conversations, there were some cases in which the pre-identified topics could not be covered within a single session. In these instances, students were invited for a second round of interview. All interviews were conducted within the campus or at public cafes. Students were given the autonomy to pick the locations of interviews so as to reduce my imposition on their time. I also ensured that the interview locations were conducive for conversations to take place, such as the corner of a café or a part of the campus with minimal distractions.

During interviews, I adopted a three-fold technique around listening: process listening, interpretive listening, and active listening (see Seidman 1998). Process listening is a technique of managing open-ended interviews, where the researcher has to monitor the time and flow of the conversation. While students were leading the conversations, I also had to “pull back” their attention so that the conversations remain relevant to the research topic. Interpretive listening is a technique for ensuring that certain words and phrases used by students were understood within their culturally situated and intended meanings. For instance, students often mentioned the phrase “a good degree education” in our conversations, which was somewhat ambiguous. But after clarification, it became clear that they were actually referring specifically to a degree education at local public universities.

This is crucial even for researchers, like myself, who might be able to claim a measure of “insider” knowledge to the “native lingo” (i.e. *Singlish*). Finally, I have found it vital to be an interviewer who actively listens with attention and respect to the interviewees, interacting and engaging them by way of paraphrasing what I have heard and making sure there was a level of shared understanding throughout the conversation. This communicative technique has not only enabled me to comprehend better the meanings that students were attempting to convey during interviews, but also allowed students to listen and reflect on what they have said. There were numerous moments when students found themselves saying things they did not intend to, and had the opportunities to explain further or clarify themselves. Also as part of my performance as an “active listener”, I sometimes cited (anonymously) interesting anecdotes and things that other students have said as a way to elicit responses from students. I have found this exceptionally useful for comparing narratives and for generating dialogues across different students without them being physically present in the same time-space. The benefit of doing so ensures confidentiality between students themselves.

Although the majority of interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis as part of ethical practice, there were several cases when students requested to be interviewed within small group settings. I have found that interviews were more challenging to manage under such circumstances. It was difficult to be as attentive to individual narratives as I wanted due to the multiple voices that were unfolding in the conversations. The benefit of these group interviews was that students were able to directly build on and contest each other’s perspectives, thereby producing a more multi-layered narrative around a given topic. However, I was able to explore less scope than during one-to-one interviews. I typically invited individual students for a follow-up interview for such cases, and while some have accepted, a few have also declined.

### *Classed relations and personal disclosure*

Throughout the process of doing fieldwork, I had to confront my classed positionality as a researcher, thereby complicating any straightforward assumption of my cultural proximity as a Singaporean working in a Singaporean context. Growing up in a single parent, average income family, I have always identified myself as an ordinary middle-class Singaporean youth – an identification that many SPI students shared with. Nevertheless, this supposed matching of class between the students and myself was undermined by what Stich (2012) referred to as reputational affects. According to her, these affects are “the deeply felt, socially constructed components of everyday life – they are more the sticky residues left behind by the constancy of reputation than reputation itself – the stuff that leaves a lasting mark and won’t wash clean or easily shake free” (Stich 2012, 30). On the one hand, young people at SPI were marked by a “bad” reputation tied to stereotypical views such as “failures”, “those who cannot make it”, and “lousy students” (in the students’ own words). On the other hand, my body represented to them the bearer of “good” reputation: someone who graduated from a local public university and studying for a doctorate degree abroad – the archetypal highly educated and mobile Singaporean elite. This relational positioning between SPI students and myself thoroughly challenged my assumed identity as “indigenous” by class and nationality, reconfigured me into an “elite” educated person, and in a way that reflected the contrasting, hierarchical images of the subject of value in Singapore’s higher education landscape. These emergent class dynamics were particularly striking over the first three months of fieldwork, when I became aware of a performative politics that surrounded the way I disclosed my identity to students at SPI.

In a typical first-time encounter with students, I would initiate a conversation by greeting them, telling them who I am, where I am from, the purpose of my presence at SPI, and whether they could spare me some time to have a chat. Within the short space of a minute

or so, I would have fulfilled an important and crucial research practice that is considered ethical: a full disclosure of identity as researcher. What this meant was that students not only knew that I was a “researcher”, they also knew that I was a doctoral student (read: highly-educated) from the University of Oxford (read: elite overseas university). I had also imagined that by revealing my university affiliation, I was establishing myself as a “proper”, credible researcher who sincerely wanted to understand them, as opposed to others, such as journalists, market researchers, or sales persons, who might be differently motivated to get close to students under the pretence of conducting research.<sup>4</sup> In a way, it was a strategy that I had anticipated would help put in place a measure of trust among students. But even if I did manage to affirm a degree of credibility around my research and my role as “researcher”, the simple yet powerful utterance that revealed my educational status – and hence bringing into effect a classed relationship – erected instead of dismantled a barrier to access student communities. I was also unknowingly reinforcing an unequal relationship between the students and myself. I observed that students became sensitive, perhaps even slightly offended, and put on a defensive front after knowing about my “elite” status. Some murmured phrases like “Oh, Oxford, different standards”, “*Wah*, so *atas* (i.e. high-class)”, and “One of those smart ones”. Others reacted in a self-protective and puzzled manner, as if I had no business to be around them. A few curled their lips or rolled their eyes in disdain. Through these utterances and bodily gestures, students enacted a certain moral defensiveness about their so-called “lower class” or “non-elite” status.

To be clear, not all students reacted in this fashion. But I was alerted to the frequency at how this situation occurred throughout my fieldwork. I was also becoming uncomfortable with the way they have labelled me as “elite” simply by virtue of my educational affiliations. Consequently, I became suspicious of the underlying politics involved in the disclosure of identity and wondered how students might react if I tried to be more judicious

in what I reveal about myself. On subsequent attempts to initiate conversations, I censored my university affiliation and only introduced myself as a “postgraduate student researcher at a university”. I was also careful not to engage unwittingly with deception, and hence would readily tell the students which university I was from if they did ask. However, in reality not many of them bothered to probe. They were also generally more hospitable and sympathetic when I kept the information about myself simple, and without being burdened by the markers of exclusiveness and elitism. Based on this experience, I think that researchers need to be carefully and judiciously selective in disclosing their research roles. Engaging with partial disclosure in a way that does not turn a blind eye to ethical considerations, such as deception, may be required of researchers in certain fieldwork circumstances and contexts.

Another strategy I have used to diffuse the unequal power relations around educational class differential was to engage in more self-disclosure (instead of less) during interviews. I made use of the time and space during formal interviews to share with students my personal educational journey and about my “failures” and disappointments. Part of the reason for doing so was to encourage mutual disclosure during interviews. On many occasions, students were slightly taken aback by the fact that I did not come from a genealogy of elite schooling in Singapore. They were even more surprised that I used to score Bs and Cs for the subject of Geography during “O” and “A” levels examinations, despite being a postgraduate student in the same subject. In the process of revealing partially about myself to students, who also reflect and talked about their own not-so-distant experiences, we developed a kind of shared affinity that allowed meaningful conversations to emerge. Such “give and take of social interactions” is an important form of reciprocity (Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton 2001, 323). Importantly, it also helped to lessen the burden of “elitism” that I was carrying, both in terms of my superior educational qualification as well

as the label of an “Oxford student”, and created a more “levelled field” in which students were able to speak.

Even if students’ knowledge of my educational status and the ensuing performance of class relations was not an issue that would either “make” or “break” the research, I believed that in actively managing the politics of personal disclosure I was able to ameliorate the communicative process as well as to reduce power differentials during fieldwork. Also, Mellor et al. (2014, 146) have noted that there has been “a powerful but unwritten preference within class studies which promotes the practice of class matching between researcher and participant”, as a way to gain access and “insider” knowledge about the social group that is being researched on. As my account has demonstrated, this assumption tends to ignore the difference between class locations and class identifications, as well as the classed emotions involved in conversational interactions. Nevertheless, the differences between the students and myself were productive in many instances, allowing me to develop interesting lines of questioning. By reflecting on the issue of class and reputational affects in the process of doing fieldwork, I became more empathetic towards SPI students’ defensiveness. Rather than interpreting them as unreasonable gestures of hostility, I was able to appreciate better their defensiveness as a kind of protectionist reflexivity to counteract moral denigration. This cultivated empathy subsequently re-oriented my research attention towards questions around the emotive and moral dimensions of class (Skeggs 2011; Sayer 2005), where I began to re-interpret some of their narratives and practices as class-based evaluations of value around higher education. This theme is further explored in Chapter 5.

### ***“Friendships”, reciprocities, and dilemmas***

The idea that friendships play an important role in mediating access, interpersonal relationships, and researcher’s gaze in the field has been widely acknowledged across qualitative social science researchers (Browne 2003; Taylor 2011; Glesne 1989; Coffey 2002). These scholars have argued that friendship provides a lens to bring into focus the tensions and unstable dichotomies that constitute the ethnographic field. Because of friendships, the research experience becomes enmeshed into multiple ties of obligation, responsibility, and reciprocity. First and foremost, it needs to be underlined that to speak about friendships between the students and myself is necessarily problematic, not least because it is difficult to establish whether our relationships can indeed be acknowledged as “friendships”, as opposed to other categorical terms such as “acquaintances” or “peers”. The notion of “friendships” becomes all the more complicated and confusing in the context of fieldwork when there are certain research roles, motivations, and goals that need to be configured into these interpersonal relationships. But I think it is precisely such ambivalences that need to be addressed given they form a basis for researcher-informant interactions, specifically that of reciprocity, to take place. As I developed varying degrees of friendships with students at SPI, ethical dilemmas around how to manage these relationships in a responsible and accountable manner began to emerge. In particular, three questions were significant to my negotiation with power relations and moral contours involved in managing informant-friendships: How to reciprocate in a way that maintains a professionalism that straddles between being a “friend” and a “researcher”? To what extent should I reciprocate? What happens to friendships and reciprocal relations after the researcher has “left the field”?

When I refer to professional conduct, I do not mean that the researcher’s role is to seek out some form of “objective truth” in the field “out there”. Rather, I view professionalism as a

way of relating to the informants that aims to preserve the ethical commitments and responsibilities involved in doing research. In most cases, my professional relationships with students were less problematic because our friendships were largely maintained by infrequent exchange of pleasantries and occasional meet-ups that do not involve “work”. In these informant-friendships, our reciprocities were rather straightforward. I always made sure to show my appreciation for their time by buying them drinks, aiming for minimal disruption to their daily routines. They too did not ask much from me, and were comfortable with sparing me some of their time and energy. But there were several students whom I have developed a greater level of intimacy through more frequently hanging out for a meal or drink and exchange of conversations. Given this regular exposure and deeper sense of familiarity with each other, both the students and myself might have sometimes forgotten about the dual roles that we inhabited. For example, there were a few times during interviews when students would unwittingly “bad-mouth” about friends they have introduced me to speak to. As a researcher, it can be awkward to know about these disclosures about other informants, especially when the informants themselves did not actively choose to do so. Even though I have tried to omit these “accidental” disclosures in my notes and transcripts, I also wondered if my perceptions of those students have been inadvertently shaped since it is almost impossible to “un-hear” what has been heard. Similarly, I also questioned whether I have unknowingly revealed too much about my own research arguments and opinions and in the process shifted their perspectives towards my scholarly interpretations, given that students might perceive me as an “authoritative” and “expert” knower.

Another challenge pertaining to the blurring of boundaries between being a professional researcher and as a friend to the informant had to do with negotiating “private” and “work” life (Hall 2009). This issue emerged when one of the students whom I have had several

conversations and interviews with began to see me as a confidante. Initially, she would share with me some of her frustrations regarding school life and about colleagues at her workplace when we met up. Gradually, she started to send me mobile text messages to convey negative emotions about what was happening in school, at work, and even at home. I began to question whether I have been playing my “empathy” cards wrongly and shown too much of my willingness to listen to her. Moreover, I also became aware that many of our meet-ups that were meant to be about “work” had turned into long sessions of “pep talk”. In this instance, my perennial concerns with colonising the students’ time and being overly intrusive were turned back on myself. I felt like my informant has intruded my “private” life. Despite this discomfort, I found it difficult to intervene or ignore her because I did not want to upset her, which might be considered a form of emotional harm. I also did not want to send the wrong signal that our friendship was in any way pretentious or purely instrumental. After some careful thought and knowing that she enjoys writing, I gently recommended that she make use of blogging to document her emotions. To avoid any sense of aversion, I added that my suggestion was a way to help me collect “useful” data about her emotional narratives. She took up the suggestion and subsequently became less reliant on me to provide her a listening ear. I also played my part by making sure to browse through her blog and add some comments, so that she knew I was reading. Over time, her entries became less frequent and the blog eventually became defunct. I was also hesitant to enquire about the blog, even though we continued to stay in touch through cordial exchange of greetings once in a while.

The kinds of reciprocities I have underlined so far mainly involved the implicit give and take of time, energy, and emotional labour. But what happens when an informant-friend overtly asked for a favour to be returned in a specific way, but which had to be refused by the researcher? A student had asked me over coffee one day, “Hey, Ian. Actually, I need a

favour from you. To be honest, when I first helped you with the project I thought maybe you could write a reference letter for my graduate study application.” It may appear to make ethical sense – specifically ethnography’s emphasis on the ethic of generosity – that I should return him this favour. But given that I have gone through the same process of soliciting for references, I knew that these letters are key to any graduate study application and would require “voices” that were much more authoritative than mine. I explained to him that I was not in the best position to write a reference letter for him. He, however, told me that he had run out of options and could not think of anyone else to do it. Even so, I maintained my position and insisted that it would not be in his best interest for me to do so. I dealt with the situation in the best way that I could. I helped him compile a list of people who could comment more substantially about his academic and/or work performance. Additionally, I offered him some advice for writing and improving the personal statement that accompanied his application. What this anecdote illustrates is the importance of researchers to make flexible and responsible decisions with regard to the rules of reciprocity in fieldwork (Huisman 2008; Hall 2009). Even if the favour is well within the means of the researcher, one needs to consider whether it is in the interest of the informant to reciprocate.

In May 2014, I began to wrap up my fieldwork and was ready to “exit” the field. But if we accept that the ethnographic “field” is not simply a geographical location but constituted in and through social relationships, then those friendships that continue to exist between SPI students and myself must mean that there is no such thing as fully leaving the “field” behind. This is all the more so given the passive maintenance of ongoing relationships through social media platforms such as Facebook (Sin 2015). Indeed, apart from exchanging mobile contact numbers and email addresses, one of the most convenient ways for me to keep in contact with informants was through Facebook. Although I had not intended to conduct fieldwork on the Internet, or what some have called virtual/online ethnography (Hine 2000;

Markham 2005), it was difficult to pretend that my ethnographic knowledge remains bounded to the specific time and space of fieldwork. For instance, I once “shared” on Facebook an opinion piece written by an SPI student about private degree education in Singapore. Within a single day of appearing on the Facebook news feed, the article garnered a stream of comments from other SPI students. SPI students who were “friends” on Facebook with me “hanged out” together online through the “shared” article and engaged in a lively dialogue about the plight and fate of private degree students. This, for me, was an interesting and significant observation about the way these young people perform a kind of subtle politics. But given that I had not sought the approval from the institutional ethical board, I was unsure whether this could be included as a part of the “data” to be presented in research writing. Nevertheless, I subsequently decided that to exclude this observation was akin to omitting a vital, even if provisional, style of students’ online political activism.

The decision to write this observation into my research required that I devise a strategy to ensure ethical standards were met. First, I wrote to these students individually on Facebook to request their permission to include the dialogue in my writing. Second, after all the students involved in the dialogue had agreed, I changed the privacy setting for that particular post to restrict visibility only to myself. This is to ensure that nobody would be able to trace the dialogue back to the initial article on the news feed. Finally, I chose to quote the dialogue without adding any names to ensure further anonymity. I also communicated to the students that even with these measures put in place, anyone who has read the article and the comments would be able to identify who wrote what. But because none of the comments were (politically) sensitive, confidential, or would render the students vulnerable to potential harm, the students and I agreed that there was adequate protection

and no breach of privacy within the norms of the specific context in which I was gathering and disseminating information (see Nissenbaum 2010).

### **Analysis and representation**

At the heart of any qualitative (ethnographic) research is the concern with analysis and representation. As with any other phases of research, the processes involved in thinking about what to do with fieldwork materials are necessarily imbued with a politics of framing (i.e. inclusions and omissions informed by theory and practice). Although researchers are often already beginning to analyse and frame their research through decisions and omissions in the “field”, it is during the post-fieldwork period that researchers have to engage more intensely with the situated practices of analysing and writing. As Crang (2003) suggests, if we accept that analysis is a process of “disciplining” and “assembling” research materials, then we might begin to imagine the practice of analysing as involving techniques of recombination, translation, and transformation. It is not about representing a bird’s eye view of a world “out there”, but rather making use of the embodied knowledge gained from the “field” to create new insights. Drawing on the ideas of Derrida and Latour respectively, Bingham (2003, 153-157) has termed this process as writing up with a “deconstructive reflexivity” and “reconstructive reflexivity”. In this final section on research methodology, I discuss the situated practices and considerations that helped weave my fieldwork materials into narratives.

### ***Notes and transcripts***

Fieldnotes were key to my research analysis and representation. I used fieldnotes not only as a way of documenting observations during fieldwork, but also as a way of reflecting on my own insecurities, choices, and strategies throughout the entire research process. In this way, fieldnotes reflect “the way in which we tried to make new information understandable

for ourselves, using our own interpretive frames, concepts and categories, and gradually shifting into new frames, making connections between earlier and current events” (Blommaert and Dong 2010, 37). Therefore, the notes we make in and about the “field” implicitly contribute to the process of epistemic production. For the purpose of organisation, my fieldnotes were categorised into two broad types, which were recorded in separate notebooks. The first type of fieldnotes documented the on-site observations I made during the times I hanged about at SPI. They were largely impressionistic and included a range of things that I saw, heard, and felt while, for example, seated down on a corridor bench or walking around the campus. In particular, I paid attention to what the students were doing on a daily basis. Initially, these notes provided me with a source of information to make sense of the environment that I had to navigate in the subsequent months of fieldwork. At a later stage, they became an important part of the analysis, where I reflected the ways in which students were making use of space and time in SPI to cultivate interpersonal relationships and identities among themselves.

The second type of fieldnotes was made during informal conversations with students. These notebooks contained the key topics we talked about, interesting insights, anecdotes, and bits and pieces of quotes that caught my attention. These notes were also necessarily partial and inflected through an interpretive lens. Due to both practical and ethical reasons, I never used a audio recorder during these informal conversations. I imagined that it would not only be cumbersome but also offensive to approach students and tell them that I wished to audio-record our conversations. Therefore, these notes were an important and concrete source of student narratives. I also relied heavily on these notes to generate analytical themes on the ways SPI students understood their educational and social worlds. In most circumstances, I would scribble down notes immediately after a conversation took place, so that I could be engaged in a conversation rather than furiously jotting down notes. For the same reason of

not using audio recorders, I was focused on producing a convivial environment and “researcher-informant” relationship. However, there were times when I felt that too many things were going on, for instance, in relation to emergent insights and ideas from students, that I found it reasonable to take down fieldnotes during the conversation. In such situations, I would be upfront with the students about my difficulty to keep track on the conversations without making notes. Students were often empathetic towards my position and did not mind that I do so.

My fieldnotes were all handwritten in the first instance. But as a way of managing this copious amount of information, I also typed them out into a software program, Evernote, that functions as a digital notebook. This program allowed me to search effectively across all the notes with the use of keywords. I was also able to add tags to the notes with thematic code words, such as “class”, “friendship”, or “politics”, to enhance the organisation and search process. I preferred this more “organic” way of managing my data, as opposed to sophisticated software programs. I do not think that qualitative data analysis software programs, such as ATLAS.ti, are particularly useful for an interpretive research that, in my opinion, requires a measure of human intuition and sensibility.

Another source of fieldwork materials that was critical to my analysis was student narratives collected in the form of audio-recorded formal interviews. All thirty-five interviews were personally transcribed to ensure that I have had the chance to listen to the interviews. Anyone who has transcribed an interview that lasted for at least an hour would sympathise with the laborious efforts that need to be invested into this activity. Drawing on earlier painful lessons of saving the hard work of transcribing to the very last moment, I made sure that all interviews were transcribed on the same day after conducting them. In addition to not having to toil away for hours doing last minute transcriptions, I found that

engaging with interview materials – the act of listening and typing down those spoken words – was itself a reflexive process. To this end, it is important to acknowledge that engaging with transcribing as an ongoing activity from the early stages of fieldwork can contribute to the iterative work of developing and refining interpretive frames. Based on my experience, I have gained insights from interviews that provided thematic cues for subsequent exploration, such as the emotional dimension of student narratives. But I also do not intend to romanticise the activity. As Bucholtz (2000, 1446) argues, “there is no such thing as a disinterested transcript”. The transcribing process involves interpretive choices that are made consciously and unconsciously by transcribers. For instance, I have knowingly excluded certain parts of what students were saying due to background noises and included annotations of expressive tones that students used as a way to enrich transcripts, based on what I heard and recall from the interviews. I might have also unwittingly paraphrased words used by students based on what I thought sounded correct. All these subtle practices around transcription point to the inevitable insertion of the “researcher-self” into what are often straightforwardly accepted as informant “voices”. Thinking more deeply about the politics of interview transcribing can, therefore, enrich methodological reflections around the use of interviews in qualitative research (Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson 2015)

### ***Analysing and writing***

My analysis of informal conversations, transcribed interviews, and textual materials collected in SPI, as well as supplementary documents like government speeches and reports, was largely informed by discourse analysis. As Hannam (2001, 195) explains, “discourse analysis treats texts as mediated cultural products which are part of wider systems of knowledge which may set the limits for, or discipline, everyday life”. Differing from textual analysis, which usually treats cultural texts as independent of power structures, discourse

analysis is a technique that helps to unpack the discursive rules, enunciations, and pedagogies that constitute cultures. I have found Waitt's (2005) identification of the following components to discourse analysis a useful checklist: suspending preexisting categories by engaging in critical social theories, recursive engagement with the texts, coding for themes, identifying "hidden" epistemologies and omissions, reading for inconsistencies and contradictions, and situating discourses within social contexts. Understanding and doing discourse analysis in this manner also meant that analysis was a continuing performance, requiring the researcher to create their interpretive frames in a "forward" and "backward" manner in order to sharpen analytical views. Reading student narratives and textual materials as produced within vectors of power allows for a more critical understanding of how power structures are woven across different scales and actors and "metabolised" by individuals (Weis and Fine 2012).

But as Sayer (2005, 51) noted, people are not "bloodless figures who seemingly drift through life, behaving in ways which bear the marks of their social position and relations of wider discourses, disciplining themselves only because it is required of them, but as if nothing mattered to them". Therefore, attention was also given to what the students were doing with discourses in their everyday life. I analysed how students mobilised certain discourses to frame their experiences, justify their actions, and perform identities. Although many of these practices themselves were structured and produced by discourses, I also found that students often make use of different discursive resources, whether they are stated or not, to evaluate and problematise their lives. Such practices represent an act of "pushing away" from hegemonic discourses, rather than being blindly enrolled into them. This shift of focus from how discourses structure student practices – which tends to be the emphasis of most critical discourse analyses – to how practices are animating discourses is also underwritten by theories of cultural production (Willis 1981; Levinson, Foley and

Holland 1996). By framing my analysis in this manner, I openly acknowledged the role of agency among young people, their capacity to “act differently” even within seemingly pervasive neoliberalising contexts, and the wide-ranging repertoire of practices that might be considered political.

In his reflection on how to go about writing up research materials, Crang (2005) used the work of social theorist Walter Benjamin to suggest that writing does not necessarily need to follow a linear narrative style. He wrote that the “meaning of the materials we develop may burst out of pre-existing frameworks, that novelty may emerge through analysis, rather than it being about working out prior theories or prepared explanations” (Crang 2005, 137). The appeal of this, for me, was the possibility to use my research materials in a way that tries to produce new interpretations that are hitherto under-emphasised in existing scholarship. Drawing on the strength of ethnography’s attention to detail and subtlety, I wrote up my research materials into a series of four papers that would generate what Ortner (2005, 45) calls “countercurrents of subjectivity”. Although each paper addresses a specific aspect of student narratives and practices, they should also be read alongside one another to gain a sense of how students were producing different forms of subjective countercurrents to the so-called neoliberal cultural hegemony. I used my research materials reflexively to write about these “alternative” narratives that would either nuance or challenge existing theoretical constructs around young people’s mainstream/alternative political agency, understanding of value, caring practices, and cosmopolitan performances within neoliberalising contexts. I see such an approach as a more spirited way to engage with both the theoretical and empirical substance of doing research.

Lastly, decisions around how to represent our research are also informed by the audience and interpretive communities that we wish to or are already engaging with. I adopted the

publication route genre because I wanted to present my fieldwork materials in a way that directly addresses a specific set of academic scholarship and debate. Writing them in the format of publications has allowed me to achieve this. In doing so, my research case study was able to add empirical flesh as well as contribute theoretically to the geographical scholarship in a timely fashion. Adopting the publication route has also meant that some of the theoretical emphases and choices of empirical materials were inevitably influenced by the peer-reviewing process. I have found their indirect contributions to the research highly productive. Not only have I learned to sharpen my arguments, I also gained new insights and ways to evaluate my research materials. Additionally, it is also important to acknowledge the work of reviewers given that they have help shaped the research writing. One dilemma that needs further reflection, however, is the fact that these reviewers were unaware of their “contributions” to my doctoral research. Whether this might be considered ethically problematic remains to be debated. As Pryke (2003, 163) reminded us, the intellectual and physical energies invested in thinking and writing up are “strongly shaped by the qualities – the conventions and the expectations – of the spaces of the university”. Therefore, it is important to be aware, especially for research students like myself, that the process of writing is never separated from its wider institutional environment

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have detailed the methodological design and routes that underpin my study. I began by establishing a theoretically informed ethnographic case study based on a single private higher educational institute in contemporary Singapore. To this end, I showed that Singapore provides an illuminating case for examining the neoliberal politics of citizenship formation, through the lens of private higher education and its non-elite educational subjects. I also laid down the rationale for my selected sample of fieldwork locus and students. I then proceeded to discuss the fieldwork process through critical considerations

for the actual conduct of ethnography, including issues around ethical dilemmas, methodological strategies, and reflections on intersubjective positionalities. In particular, I focused on the importance of classed relations and friendships in constituting my fieldwork and analytical orientations. The final part of this chapter addressed issues of analysis and representation by revealing the inevitable micro-politics of framing and writing. It is hoped that in providing a clear and transparent account of my research design and methodology, I would have demonstrated a level of rigour that is key to qualitative geographical research (Baxter and Eyles 1997).

## Notes

1. Under the British colonial empire, Singapore was seen as a mere trading emporium and outpost in the Far East. Educational institutions under the British government were more interested in providing administrative skills to civil service staff that are supporting the colonial administration, rather than responding to the need for a sustainable education system for the local population. At the turn of the nineteenth century, pockets of vernacular educational provision have sprouted mainly in the form of Christian mission schools and private schools founded and funded by rich Chinese immigrant merchants. The educational landscape was a fragmented one, divided along four mediums of instruction – English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil languages – and schooling infrastructure was poorly invested (Gopinathan, 1974).

2. Episodic public debates about meritocracy and educational inequality started to surface throughout the 2000s. One prominent example is the national Gifted Education Programme (GEP). The GEP was implemented in 1984 under the rationale that more resources should be invested in a small pool of talented individuals, who will then be groomed to become future leaders of the society. This group of “gifted” children comprises of the top 1 per cent of the cohort who sits for the selection test each year at the age of 9. Despite having received criticisms for its unequal distribution of resources and exerting unnecessary stress on children and parents, the GEP continues to be implemented on the grounds that the “intellectually gifted need a high degree of mental stimulation” which “may not be met in the mainstream classroom”, and that given human capital is all that Singapore has for its resources it is “to the advantage of the nation that the gifted are helped and nurtured” (MOE 2014a). The Integrated Program introduced at the secondary school level is one other major program that reflects the elitist strand in the education system. Although policy-makers envision these programs as differentiated learning pathways that would allow young people to maximise their potential as learners, such initiatives often end up serving the interests of families from better socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, only 40 per cent of the students enrolled in primary schools that offer the GEP reside in public housing flats (MOE 2012a).

3. This notion of the “alternative” is different from the one deployed in Kraftl’s (2013) research on alternative education spaces in the UK, which takes its definition as forms of

education that espouse a set of philosophies that is distinct from those mainstream conventions in state-sanctioned educational programs. To my knowledge, alternative educational arrangements defined in this manner are virtually absent in the context of higher education in Singapore.

4. This is a common lay strategy that aforementioned individuals are known to use in Singapore as a way to access potential informants or customers.

## References

- Anagnost, A. 2013. Introduction: life-making in neoliberal times. In *Global Futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy in Uncertain Times*, eds. A. Anagnost, A. Arai, and H. Ren, 1–28. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Barr, M., and Z. Skrbiš. 2008. *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-building Project*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Baxter, J., and J. Eyles. 1997. Evaluating qualitative research in social geography: establishing “rigour” in interview analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22 (4):505–525.
- Bingham, N. 2003. Writing reflexively. In *Using Social Theory: Thinking through Research*, eds. M. Pryke, G. Rose, and S. Whatmore, 145–162. London: Sage Publications.
- Blommaert, J., and Dong, J. 2010. *Ethnographic Fieldwork: a Beginner’s Guide*. Canada: Multilingual Matters.
- Brown, P. Lauder, H., and Ashton, D. 2011. *The Global Auction: the Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Browne, K. 2003. Negotiations and fieldworkings: friendship and feminist research. *Acme: an International E-journal for Critical Geographies* 2 (2):132–146.
- Bucholtz, M. 2000. The politics of transcription. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (10):1439–1465.
- Butz, D., and K. Besio. 2009. Autoethnography. *Geography Compass* 3 (5):1660–1674.
- Castree, N. 2005. The epistemology of particulars: human geography, case studies and “context.” *Geoforum* 36 (5):541–544.
- Chan, H. C. 1991. Political developments, 1965–1979. In *A History of Singapore*, eds. E. C. T. Chew and E. Lee, 157–181. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Chang, H. Y. (1995). Singapore: education and change of class stratification. *Southeast Asian Studies* 32 (4):455–476.
- Chang, R. 2011. Parents' background the edge for students at top schools: MM. *The Straits Times*, 25 January.
- Chong, T. 2012. A return to normal politics: Singapore General Elections 2011. *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2012:283–298.

- Chua, B. H. 1995. *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Coffey, A. 2002. Ethnography and self: reflections and representations, In *Qualitative Research in Action*, ed. T. May, 314–331. London: Sage.
- Collins, R. 1979. *The Credential Society: Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. New York: Academic Press.
- Collins, F. L., R. Sidhu, N. Lewis, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2014. Mobility and desire: international students and Asian regionalism in aspirational Singapore. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35 (5):661–676.
- Crang, M. 2003. Telling materials. In *Using Social Theory: Thinking through Research*, eds. M. Pryke, G. Rose and S. Whatmore, 127-144. London: Sage.
- Davie, S. 2012. 40% of each cohort to get shot at local universities. *The Straits Times*. 27 August: A1 & A6.
- Denzin, N., and Y. S. Lincoln. 2005. Introduction: the discipline and practice of qualitative research, In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Eds N. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 1-42. London: Sage.
- Dowling, R., K. Lloyd, and S. Suchet-Pearson. 2015. Qualitative methods 1: enriching the interview. *Progress in Human Geography* Advanced online publication: <http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0309132515596880>.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2006. Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 (2):219–245.
- Glesne, C. 1989. Rapport and friendship in ethnographic research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 2 (1):45–54.
- Goh, C. T. 2010. Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, at Singapore Scout Association's 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary dinner, 27 February 2010, 8:20 PM at Suntec International Convention Centre. Available: [http://160.96.2.142/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speeches/interviews/seniorminister/2010/February/speech\\_by\\_mr\\_gohchoktongseniorministeratsingaporescoutassociatio.html#.U7W0VI2VnT5](http://160.96.2.142/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speeches/interviews/seniorminister/2010/February/speech_by_mr_gohchoktongseniorministeratsingaporescoutassociatio.html#.U7W0VI2VnT5) [Accessed on 04 August 2014]
- Gopinathan, S. 2007. Globalisation, the Singapore developmental state and education policy: a thesis revisited. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 5 (1):53–70.
- . 1999. Preparing for the next rung : economic restructuring and educational reform in Singapore. *Journal of Education and Work* 12 (3):295–308.
- . 1974. *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore: 1945-1973*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

- Hall, S. M. 2009. "Private life" and "work life": difficulties and dilemmas when making and maintaining friendships with ethnographic participants. *Area* 41 (3):263–272.
- Hannam, K. 2001. Coping with archival and textual data. In *Doing Cultural Geography*, Ed. P. Shurmer-Smith, 189-197. London: Sage.
- Haraway, D. 1988. Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14 (3):575-599.
- Harrison, J., L. MacGibbon, and M. Morton. 2001. Regimes of trustworthiness in qualitative research: the rigors of reciprocity. *Qualitative Inquiry* 7 (3):323–345.
- Hill, M., and K. F. Lian. 1995. *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*. London: Routledge.
- Hine, C. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Huisman, K. 2008. "Does this mean you're not going to come visit me anymore?": an inquiry into an ethics of reciprocity and positionality in feminist ethnographic research. *Sociological Inquiry* 78 (3):372–396.
- Jeffrey, C. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Katz, C. 2001. On the grounds of globalization: a topography for feminist political engagement, *Signs* 26(4): 1213-1234.
- Kraftl, P. 2013. *Geographies of Alternative Education: Diverse Learning Spaces for Children and Young People*. Bristol: University Press.
- Levinson, B. A., D. E. Foley and D. C. Holland. 1996. *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ley, D. 1988. Interpretive social research in the inner city. In *Research in Human Geography*, ed. J. Eyles, 121-138. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lim, L. 2013. Meritocracy, elitism, and egalitarianism: a preliminary and provisional assessment of Singapore's primary education review. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 33 (1):1–14.
- Liow, E. D. 2011. The neoliberal-developmental state: Singapore as case study. *Critical Sociology* 38 (2):241–264.
- Markham, A. N. 2005. The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Eds N. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 793-820. London: Sage.
- Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage.

- McDowell, L. 2010. Interviewing: fear and liking in the field. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, eds. D. Delyser, S. Herbert, S. Aitken, M. Crang, and L. McDowell, 156-171. London: Sage.
- Mellor, J., N. Ingram, J. Abrahams, and P. Beedell. 2014. Class matters in the interview setting? Positionality, situatedness and class. *British Educational Research Journal* 40 (1):135–149.
- Mills, D., and M. Morton. 2013. *Ethnography in Education*. London: Sage.
- MOE (Ministry of Education). 2010. More pathways for secondary school students. Available: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2010/09/more-pathways-secondary-schools.php> [Accessed on 20 July 2014]
- . 2012a. Proportion of students in top primary schools living in HDB flats. Available: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/parliamentary-replies/2012/11/proportion-of-students-in-top-.php> [Accessed on 20 July 2014]
- . 2012b. *Report on the Committee on University Education Pathways Beyond 2015 (CUEP): Final Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- . 2014a. Gifted education programme: rationale and goals. Available: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/rationale-and-goals/> [Accessed on 11 August 2014]
- . 2014b. 2013 Graduate employment survey. Available: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/post-secondary/> [Accessed 3 July 2014]
- Morrow, V. 2008. Ethical dilemmas in research with children and young people about their social environments. *Children's Geographies* 6 (1):49-61.
- Moss, P. 2002. *Feminist Geography in Practice: Research and Methods*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ng, P. T., and C. Tan. 2010. The Singapore global schoolhouse: an analysis of the development of the tertiary education landscape in Singapore. *International Journal of Educational Management* 24 (3):178–188.
- Nissenbaum, H. 2010. *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ortmann, S. 2011. Singapore: authoritarian but newly competitive. *Journal of Democracy* 22 (4):153–164.
- Ortner, S. B. 2005. Subjectivity and cultural critique. *Anthropological Theory* 5 (1):31–52.
- Patton, M. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Pryke, M. 2003. Situated audiences. In *Using Social Theory: Thinking through Research*, eds. M. Pryke, G. Rose and S. Whatmore, 163-180. London: Sage.

- Pykett, J. 2010. Introduction: the pedagogical state: education, citizenship, governing. *Citizenship Studies* 14 (6):617–619.
- Sayer, A. 2005. Class, moral worth and recognition. *Sociology* 39 (5):947–963.
- Seidman, I. 1998. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: a Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. New York: Teacher’s College Press.
- Sidhu, R., K. C. Ho, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2011. Emerging education hubs: the case of Singapore. *Higher Education* 61 (1):23–40.
- Sin, H. L. 2015. “You’re not doing work, you’re on Facebook!”: ethics of encountering the field through social media. *The Professional Geographer* Advanced online publication: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00330124.2015.1062706>.
- Skeggs, B. 2011. Imagining personhood differently: person value and autonomist working-class value practices. *Sociological Review* 59 (3):496–513.
- Stake, R. 1995. *The Art of Case Study Research*. London: Sage.
- Stich, A. 2012. *Access to Inequality: Reconsidering Class, Knowledge, and Capital in Higher Education*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.
- Tan, J. 2010. Compulsory education in Singapore – who benefits? *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 30 (4):401–418.
- Tan, K. P. 2008. Meritocracy and elitism in a global city: ideological shifts in Singapore. *International Political Science Review* 29 (1):7–27.
- Taylor, J. 2011. The intimate insider: negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research. *Qualitative Research* 11 (1):3–22.
- The Straits Times. 4 Sep 2014. *More taking private route to a degree*. Singapore: The Singapore Press Holdings.
- . 20 Jul 2014. *Private education special*. Singapore: The Singapore Press Holdings.
- . 8 Jun 2012. *Private institutions attracting more Singaporean students*. Singapore: The Singapore Press Holdings.
- . 17 Oct 2011. *More S’poreans turn to private schools to get degrees*. Singapore: The Singapore Press Holdings.
- Van Maanen, J. 1988. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Walford, G. 2005. Research ethical guidelines and anonymity. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 28 (1):83–93.
- . 2001. Site selection within comparative case study and ethnographic research. *Compare : A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 31 (2):151–164.

- Waite, G. 2005. Doing discourse analysis. In *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, ed. I. Hay, 163--191. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Waring, P. 2013. Singapore's global schoolhouse strategy: retreat or recalibration? *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (5):874–884.
- Waters, J., and M. Leung. 2014. "These are not the best students": continuing education, transnationalisation and Hong Kong's young adult "educational non-elite." *Children's Geographies* 12 (1):56–69.
- Weis, L., and M. Fine. 2012. Critical bifocality and circuits of privilege : expanding critical ethnographic theory and design. *Harvard Educational Review* 82 (2):173–202.
- Willis, P. 1981. Cultural production is different from cultural reproduction is different from social reproduction is different from reproduction. *Interchange* 12 (2-3):48–67.
- Wong, S. Y. (2014) Singapore needs to change social culture to transform economy: Tharman. *Channel Newsasia*. 5 July.
- Woodward, K. 2008. Hanging out and hanging about: Insider/outsider research in the sport of boxing. *Ethnography* 9 (4):536–560.
- Yang, P. 2014. "Authenticity" and "foreign talent" in Singapore: the relative and negative logic of national identity. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 29 (2):408-437.
- Yeung, H. W. C. 2000. State intervention and neoliberalism in the globalizing world economy: lessons from Singapore's regionalization programme. *The Pacific Review* 13 (1):133–162.

# **Biopolitical Geographies of Student Life: Private Higher Education and Citizenship Life-making in Singapore**

## **Abstract**

Drawing on eleven months of fieldwork in Singapore, this article uses the case of young people studying at a private higher education institute to study the biopolitical geographies of student life. I focus on the analytic lens of biopolitical citizenship as one way to understand how biopower works in and through the material relations and practices of social reproduction. I critically examine how young people are engaging with and performing biopolitics in ways that attempt to (re)define what constitutes a “mainstream”, viable classed and gendered citizenship life. I also explore students’ (“alternative”) biopolitical performances through their critical evaluations of state-led discourses, their ability to invent hope as a way of coping and living, and their online enactment of a form of modest activism. Additionally, this article offers an initial engagement with Kraftl’s (2015) theorisation of alternative biopolitical projects in educational spaces, and introduces the concepts of “pulling” and “pushing” to frame the paradoxical manner in which young people engage with biopolitics. *Key Words* *biopolitics, higher education, citizenship, class/gender, Singapore*

Recent scholarship has provided valuable insights into the lives of students in higher educational settings from a range of theoretical perspectives. This work spans diverse topics, including studentification in cities (Smith 2009; Chatterton 2010), student im/mobilities (Christie 2007; Holdsworth 2009a; Hinton 2011), international/transnational student migration (Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Cheng 2014; Waters and Leung 2014), transitional experiences (Hopkins 2006; Holdsworth 2009b; Holton 2014; 2015), and the politics of difference within university campus (Hopkins 2011; Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine 2012). In this article, I propose that a greater consideration for the role of biopolitical configurations in educational spaces, especially those that emerge from young people’s narratives and practices, can enrich this research area. Although biopolitics is not an entirely novel field of enquiry within the broader scholarship on geographies of education and young people, the bulk of empirical work and theorisation is still centered on schooling, children, and childhoods rather than higher education and youth (Katz 2008; Kraftl 2015). I offer a way of doing biopolitical analysis that makes two critical contributions to understanding higher education and student life: a gender analysis of

educational capital that accounts for subtle acts of re-working mainstream gender norms; and a re-conceptualization of student politics as *bio*-politics in order to broaden student practices, at different sites and scales, that might be considered as political.

The research informing this article was conducted in Singapore with young people studying at a private educational institute. As an emblematic pedagogical state (Pykett 2010), Singapore provides an illuminating case study to explore the biopolitical geographies of student life. Education has been a key pillar in the city-state's projects of nation-building, economic development, and globalization. Since independence, the government has invested in the ideological instruments of meritocracy and pragmatism "to socialize Singaporeans into disciplined, hardworking, productive, efficient and docile worker-consumer subjects for a capitalist economy and authoritarian polity" (Tan 2012, 84). The higher education landscape is governed through a careful calibration of participation rates at the local universities to manage the match between the graduate labour and the economy (MOE 2012). In recent years, young people's swelling demand for degree credentials has ostensibly outstripped the speed at which the public university landscape is expanding in Singapore. This is signaled by the remarkable increase in Singaporeans enrolled into private higher education since the 2000s, making it an increasingly viable alternative route for securing degree credentials. Under such conditions, "private degree education" (a more familiar term used in Singapore) emerged as a distinctive educational market for a cohort of young people to pursue their goal of earning a degree, getting a "good" job, and maintaining a viable life in a highly competitive and fast-paced society.

The central task here is to reflect on how this segment of young people understands and uses higher education under the state's biopolitical regime. The analytic lens is trained on biopolitical citizenship to examine how biopower plays out in the lives of private degree

students as citizens. Through a discussion of their narratives and practices, I show that investments in higher education cannot be understood as straightforward strategies to accumulate cultural and social capital, which is then used to convert into economic gain. Their educational investments also encompass moral and emotional considerations to maintain a viable life in contemporary Singapore, which is simultaneously classed and gendered. I demonstrate how the state biopolitics, while retaining a strong hegemonic grip over the manner in which students perform citizenship life, is negotiated and contested in subtle ways. Even as their performances of biopolitics are often non-spectacular and sometimes provisional, these young people are capable of critically re-working dominant scripts of power in their own viable ways.

The article begins by highlighting one possible direction for conceptualizing students as biopolitical citizens based on existing geographical literature. Second, the broader context of Singapore will be provided to illustrate the central role of education (alongside work and family) in constituting citizenship life in the city-state. Third, I locate the case study and methods used to inform my research. The fourth part of this article discusses private degree students' narratives and practices through two key themes: becoming viable citizens in the "mainstream", and student performances of biopolitics. The concluding section underlines the contributions of this article and reflects on how ("alternative") biopolitical geographies may advance existing works on student life in higher education spaces.

### **Biopolitical geographies, social reproduction, and citizenship**

Theories of biopolitics have gained traction among scholars seeking to understand those complex socio-material, affective, and spatial relationships tied to the governance of life (e.g., Braun 2007; Dillon 2007; Anderson 2012). For Foucault, at the heart of the governance of life is a governance of populations, thereby making questions about

citizenship, territory, and state technologies crucial to geographical analyses of biopolitical projects (Legg 2005). Among others, the work of Nikolas Rose (1999) has been influential in contemporary understandings of biopower and citizenship within advanced liberal regimes. Nevertheless, his abstract and disembodied account of citizenship failed to register the delicate practices and activities that would reveal Foucault's insistence on the inventive dimension of biopolitical production. It is important to retain a notion of biopolitics as inventive for drawing attention to the multiple sites of power and the possibility of creative political actions in citizenship life (see Lemke 2002, 2005).

Higher education is an especially productive site to investigate contemporary biopolitical projects given its central role in the formation of labouring bodies, human capital, and citizenship in many parts of the world (Mitchell 2003; Ong 2007). The current global economic restructuring has kindled scholarly interests pertaining to how educational subjectivities are re-constituted in light of a neoliberal emphasis on self-responsibilization, entrepreneurial risk-taking, and human capital development (Ruddick 2003; Anagnost 2013). Many of these interests dovetail into what might be understood as biopolitical governance of citizenship life through education (Mitchell 2003; 2006). While there is now an emerging geographical scholarship around student life in the context of higher education (Holton and Riley 2013), the topic of biopolitical citizenship has yet to receive critical attention. A detailed examination of how young people in higher education are implicated in citizenship regimes, including how they are governed by as well as generating their own biopolitics across different sites and scales, can broaden existing understandings of what "student life" might entail.

In his recent work on biopolitical childhoods, Kraftl (2015, 221) advocated a search for "alternatives to an apparently pervasive neoliberal or globalised mainstream", as opposed to

theorising young people as social investment and accumulation strategies (Katz 2008). In my view, though, critical analyses of biopolitical configurations require a consideration for the necessity of social reproduction as a component of the ongoingness of life (Katz 2001). Empirical studies have evinced the persistent role of states and their relationships to (global) capital in constituting student lives in higher education, encouraging them to actively maximise the self as human capital in the global knowledge economy (Mitchell 2003). For instance, Davidson's (2008) work describes how students in college education in Silicon Valley, California strategically fashion themselves into state-promoted entrepreneurial subjects to achieve a middle-class notion of the good life. Abelmann, Park, and Kim (2009) showed that students in a South Korean college take on the burden of self-development to prepare themselves for the future global workplace, and at the same time absorb modern values such as individualism, democracy, and cosmopolitanism.

I suggest that theorising biopolitics with an insistence on how state regimes constitute young people as accumulative subjects need not preclude the possibility of alternative biopolitical projects. As Butler (1997, 2) wrote, “power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence”. To say that subjects are constituted through biopower is not to claim that they are determined. By the same token, to underline the material conditions under which young people are configured, including the ways they are classed and gendered, need not subsume alternative performances of biopolitics. It is instructive here to quote Katz (2008, 15) in further detail,

politicizing everyday life calls for uncovering the suffusion of social relations in the mundane. Taking off from there it is possible to change its very grounds [...] some of the sparks of revolutionary change can be found in, recovered from, and enacted during childhood.

Indeed, young people's performances of alternative biopolitics are often subtle and complex in nature (Katz 2004; Jeffrey 2011). For instance, Hopkins (2011) argued that Muslim students in his study generate counter-discourses through creative dialogues to challenge negative representations of their religion. In some cases, neoliberal discourses are reworked "from below" in ways that disrupt the fully autonomous subject found in many western accounts of neoliberal subject-making. Hoffman's (2010) ethnographic study on patriotic professionals in China demonstrated how college students' efforts to cultivate themselves into neoliberal self-enterprising worker-citizen subjects are concurrently informed by more social and nationalistic state pedagogies. Implicit forms of biopolitics are also located in and evoked through emotional reflexivities and sensibilities that may lead to alternative ways of doing and thinking (Horton and Kraftl 2009). Additionally, young people's articulation of biopolitical alternatives may not exist in pure (i.e. anti-capitalist or anti-mainstream) forms but may simultaneously challenge and be complicit with neoliberal regimes. This is detailed in Jeffrey's (2010) work with educated middle-class young men who protest against commercialization and corruption, but at the same time profit from neoliberalisation of higher education through their role as educational brokers.

A theory of alternative biopolitics that acknowledges the persistent workings of social reproduction takes material social practices as the vital realms for reworking and resisting those mainstream social relations. It is on this point that my approach converges with Kraftl's (2015, 234), where he urges scholars to "look for moments of experimentation and creativity that surely exist" even if it is "within the educational mainstream". But attending to the material conditions of young people's biopolitics means that those emergent rationalities and practices that may disrupt or look different – those that "push away" – from the neoliberal mainstream must be treated with caution. These practices may also, in different times and places, be "pulled back" into dominant state and educational regimes.

Therefore, biopolitical performances, even if they appear alternative, may not entirely escape those “sticky” mainstream politics of everyday life.

Drawing on insights from these writings, I argue that biopolitical accounts of student life need to acknowledge and problematise the manner in which young people’s citizen-bodies are territorialised and governed as “proxies for the future” (Smith 2012, 11). The notion of biopolitical citizenship, understood as a cultural script that governs citizen-bodies through the reproduction and normalization of social life, provides an instructive lens to examine how Singaporean state biopolitics seeks to manage certain forms of life as orthodox and viable. While students have absorbed this dominant script, they also carve out alternative ways of doing and thinking. I frame this tension between how students are simultaneously drawn into and jostling away from mainstream regimes through the concepts of “pulling” and “pushing”. With this in mind, I proceed to demonstrate how private degree students engage with higher education to navigate the demands that constitute a viable citizenship in Singapore.

### **Biopolitics in Singapore: life-making through education**

The Singaporean government’s vision of securing a body politic and maintaining the nation-state’s viability in a global economy has relied on the biopolitical instruments of meritocracy and pragmatism (Tan 2008). Under the principle of meritocracy, individuals are encouraged to earn their place in the society through a system of “merit” measured by grades at school and university (and performance in the workplace). The principle of pragmatism works by prompting citizens “to practise self-restraint and to suspend their ‘short-sighted’ wants in the interest of maintaining the peace, affluence, convenience and efficiency of their city” (Tan 2012, 87). Since independence, the Singaporean state has placed an exceptional emphasis on developing of human capital and civic virtues such as

talent, hard work, and individual merit. Coupled with political rationalities of anti-idealism, adaption, self-reliance, and technocratic problem-solving, the Singaporean state effectively implemented a biopolitical regime that strongly opposes a comprehensive welfare state model, and instead aims to create a depoliticised and consumerist middle-class citizenry (Tan 2012). While both meritocracy and pragmatism serve to obscure political interests of the elite class, as well as divisiveness and inequalities that are encouraged by capitalist norms, the state has upheld them as the cornerstone values of a globalizing city-state. Singaporean youth who grew up and were schooled in the city-state throughout the 1990s and 2000s have been inculcated with a set of pro-capital values within and beyond the formal educational curriculum. They were also encouraged to profit from the state's capital-driven policies by becoming self-motivated, practical, and far-sighted worker-consumer subjects.

A key outcome of the Singaporean state's pedagogical work has been the transformation of generations of families and children, across different socio-economic backgrounds, into prudent investors in formal education in order to become viable middle-class subjects (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). There is now a hegemonic understanding of university education credentials as the minimum basis for young people to secure "decent" jobs and salaries in order to maintain life in Singapore. Deeply embedded discourses of meritocracy and pragmatism that framed formal education as the most practicable mechanism for sorting individuals into different segments of the labour market further entrenched educated youth's interests to participate in the "paper chase". For many young Singaporeans, whether they come from junior colleges, polytechnics, or technical education institutes, there is a feeling of compulsion to attend university and to secure a degree (Davie 2012). This feeling is also driven by a belief that individuals who are able to secure superior credentials will gain an advantageous position when competing for desirable jobs, and that their wages will

commensurate with their educational qualifications. For instance, recent figures showed university graduates earn a monthly median starting wage of S\$3,050, while graduates of polytechnics and technical education institutes earn a starting wage of S\$1,950 and S\$1,350 respectively (MOM 2013).

In addition to governing the realms of education and work, the Singaporean state biopolitics is also tethered to a biopolitics of family life. Scholars have shown that the government's emphasis on family as the building block of a nation, as well as its firm grip on a variety of pro-capital policies around marriage and housing, has encouraged its citizens to reproduce a "normal", heterosexualised, and gendered notion of citizenship life in the city-state (Oswin 2010; Ramdas 2014). Apart from encouraging fertility through a "baby bonus" scheme, the government also uses public housing – a key aspect of an ordinary Singaporean's life – to reproduce the heterosexual nuclear family, which is usually headed by a married couple who are both educated and formally employed. This is most obviously manifested in the regulation that only (heterosexually) married couples are eligible to procure a flat under the public housing scheme, if they wish to do so before the age of thirty-five. The government has also repeatedly emphasised that the public housing is a key asset to Singaporeans, a social good to which all Singaporeans have access. As a result, marriage has become a strategy for Singaporeans to secure this social good. The topic of "How much money is needed to get married and start a family in Singapore?" is a pervasive one in public discourse amongst Singaporeans. According to a blogger of the website SG Young Investment, the average cost of a (Chinese) wedding and buying a four-room public housing flat can amount to between S\$76,000 and S\$91,000.<sup>1</sup> Since it is through education that individuals earn their credentials to secure employment, and subsequently be able to meet the financial costs involved in doing family life, then quite evidently the biopolitics of education is deeply connected to the biopolitics of family life.<sup>2</sup>

## **Case study and methods**

The research is informed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted in an institute of private higher education in Singapore, over a period of eleven months between 2013 and 2014. The institute offers both part-time and full-time degree programs, through a mixture of locally certified degree courses as well as transnational degree programs in partnership with universities from the UK, Australia, and North America. It has an estimated enrolment of about 30,000 Singaporeans and is currently the largest private institute in Singapore (Davie 2011). Most of the students whom I encountered during fieldwork were young men and women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. They are located within a broad spectrum of the middle-income family backgrounds in Singapore. Given that the total tuition fee for a standard three-year program is around S\$30,000, it is reasonable to assume that young people in their early twenties from low-income families in Singapore, and who have yet to engage with paid work, will find degree education in private institutes unaffordable. These students were pursuing their first undergraduate degree in a variety of programs ranging from social sciences to business and finance, with the latter being the most common specialization. This is because most of the degree programs offered at this institute, and to a large extent across all private degree institutes, concentrate mainly in these fields. These degrees are also highly sought after by Singaporeans themselves because careers in the financial and banking industry are popularly seen as “where the money comes from”, and therefore deemed as professional jobs of a higher status.

Much of the fieldwork involved multiple visits to the campus during the course of research, on an average of three times a week. On a typical visit, I spent around three hours walking around the campus and approaching students opportunistically. While I adopted a principle of openness and inclusivity in terms of whom to speak to during fieldwork, a large proportion of students I interacted with were ethnic Chinese. This could be an unintentional

outcome of a tendency for me to identify and approach more (racially) familiar bodies in the field. In addition to these on-site interactions with students, I invited eighteen males (fifteen Chinese, two Malay, one Indian) and seventeen female students (fifteen Chinese, two Malay) for in-depth interviews in a mixture of individual and group settings. These typically took around ninety minutes each and were conducted both within the campus and at public cafes. The interviews were semi-structured around the pre-identified topics of schooling history; reasons to pursue degree education; personal goals in life; and perceptions of Singapore's education system.

Almost all of the students in my research pursued private degree education because they were unable to gain entry into their preferred local public universities. This situation resonates with the case of Hong Kong, where an expanding transnational education sector is providing the local "educational non-elites" with fresh opportunities to access a degree education (Waters and Leung 2014). But while Waters and Leung (2014, 57) observed that "local students consistently covet domestic (not foreign) credentials", private degree students in my research still valued "western credentials". They preferred a degree education at local public universities because their institutional branding is better than that of the private institutions. This, however, does not fully challenge the value of western credentials amongst the local students. Students themselves perhaps exemplified this in an oft-heard saying: "At least we are getting an overseas degree even though it's private education". Indeed, many of them chose their programs based on the reputation of the overseas university that is awarding the degree. The existing ordering of higher educational capital in Singapore continues to privilege prestigious overseas universities in the global North, followed by a more "localised" competition amongst the public universities (Ye and Nylander 2015), and with private institutions occupying the lower tiers of the hierarchy.

Over the last two decades, local tertiary institutions such as polytechnics and universities underwent reforms that focus on building new networks, alliances, and physical infrastructure -- all part of the government's aim to transform Singapore into an education hub as part of its aspirations for globalization (Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2011). In addition to transforming the local public universities into global centers of research and innovation excellence, the government also encouraged the privatization of higher education by attracting new players into the (educational) market (Waring 2013). Given that private degree education in Singapore offers local students a "second chance" resource to escape perceived failure associated with securing a place at the local universities, it constitutes an alternative pathway to study for a degree within the local public discourse. But this notion of the "alternative" is different from the one deployed in Kraftl's (2015) research on alternative education spaces in the UK, which takes its definition as forms of education that espouse a set of philosophies that is distinct from those mainstream conventions in state-sanctioned educational programs.

Indeed, alternative education of this definition is not distinctly available in Singapore because of the highly state interventionist approach towards education. Even though alternative education in the form of homeschooling may be emerging among middle-class families in Singapore, the Compulsory Education Act requires that parents who wish to opt their children out of state schooling undergo the Ministry of Education's stringent assessment to prove that they have adequate resources to do so. To my knowledge, alternative educational arrangements are virtually absent in the context of higher education. Therefore, private degree education as an alternative education space constitutes the mainstream educational regime that is well incorporated into the neoliberal agenda of the Singaporean state to globalise its higher education sector (Waring 2013). Private degree education in Singapore is hence an empirical case of a different type of "alternative

education” as compared to the one that Kraftl (2015) used to demonstrate the concept of alter-childhoods. Nevertheless, Kraftl’s study provides a useful starting point to investigate the extent to which alternative biopolitics may emerge from within mainstream education spaces.

### **Biopolitics in the “mainstream”: becoming viable citizens**

“A degree is the norm nowadays!” This is a recurring phrase throughout my conversations with young people during fieldwork. Private degree students often remarked that the possession of a degree has become a commonplace in contemporary Singapore, where at least a third of the working population is armed with a degree qualification. They believe the degree is an indispensable form of cultural currency that confers upon them a positional advantage when bargaining for economic returns in the labour markets. Such perceptions are captured in Jia’s (twenty-four, male) reflection on the significance of a degree:

If you don’t minimally have a degree, how do you compete with others? Times are bad. Last time, maybe our parents’ generation, you can be doing well as a graduate with a diploma by earning about S\$1,500 for starting pay. Nowadays, we are in a different race, with higher standards of living, competition from foreign workers, and what not. If you have at least S\$2,000 for starting pay, you just get by. Lower than that, you will just sink to the bottom.

Like Jia, many students imagine themselves as a generation of young people who must deal with a new, and purportedly more challenging, set of socio-economic and cultural norms around education and employment. They frequently refer to the growing cost of living, disproportionate rise in wages, as well as competition from hypermobile “foreign talent” immigrants in Singapore to illustrate the imperative of ensuring their own viability in the future as workers and consumers. Their narratives resonate with the scholarship on contemporary youth who are required to constantly upgrade their educational qualifications so as to “get by” in the “race” and to cope with the shifting demands of a globalizing

economy (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). More specifically, my analysis revealed that private higher education in Singapore constitutes a relatively new form of class-making resource for these young people to secure a positional advantage and to (re)produce themselves as economically viable middle-class citizens.

Persuasive state-led biopolitical discourses of heterosexuality and gender are also informing young people's understanding of higher education. The transition from education to work and subsequently marriage and family is widely accepted as a routinised aspect of life for both men and women as they transition into adulthood. They frequently invoked the idea that growing up in contemporary Singapore requires a "good" education and "good" job to navigate key life events such as marriage and family formation. For instance, Shao (twenty-one, male) felt that "getting a degree, followed by a stable job, and finally getting married is a natural process of life". Another student described his pursuit for a degree as an "investment for the rest of [his] life" that would help him secure the financial means for getting on with life, including "money for wedding, housing loans, money for insurance, children's education" and all other associated costs. Parallel narratives were also found among the female students. Heather (twenty, female), for example, explained to me "it is very important to get a degree, build a career, and to be financially independent before entering marriage". These narratives underscore the centrality of a degree education in young people's life plans, and that it serves as a critical resource for them to "jumpstart life" (in the words of a student).

But far from being "bloodless" biopolitical subjects who are passively turned into the pro-capital citizens of the state, students purposively constituted themselves as culturally (in addition to economically) viable young men and women, in gender-specific ways. Male and female students may articulate parallel narratives pertaining to the role of degree education

in securing viable economic positions for navigating life transitions. They understand and use educational capital, however, in ways that negotiate differentiated notions of gendered roles and responsibilities in relation to future work/family life (Holloway, O'Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson 2012). To illustrate this point, I focus on how students negotiate viable forms of gendered respectability.

### ***Respectable masculinity***

Male students' understandings of educational capital, in particular, were informed by a logic of masculinity rooted in the ability to earn and to provide for the family. This logic is present in all the interviews conducted with male students, regardless of ethnicities and class locations. They perceived their anticipated roles of "breadwinners" and "providers" as key to expressing a measure of respectability. Nicholas (twenty-two) explicitly articulated this: "If you want to be respected, since young our parents tell us, a man has to provide for and feed the family." This view was also espoused by a Malay student, Farhan (twenty-four), who said, "it is a guy's job to earn and bring home the money, support the family, so that people won't look down on you".

Farhan also felt that it is morally and culturally more acceptable for women to be unemployed than for men. He added, "it's OK if a woman doesn't want to work and she can stay home; but if a man who has no job and no earning power, people will think he's lazy or gossip about your attitude." This narrative reveals the way in which gender norms and expectations around family life require men to engage with "correct" ways of performing gender, rather than automatically privileging them. As Farhan noted, failure to do so may invite stereotypical labeling and speculations around the man's moral values from the community.

Given that the dual-income family model (both husbands and wives are considered “breadwinners” and “providers”) is now a common reality for middle-class families in Singapore, male students do not believe that it is practical and economically sensible to take on the burden of sole breadwinning. Nevertheless, for varied reasons, they also expressed a preference for earning more than their future wives. For example, Shao felt that “if guys earn lower than their wives, we may feel inferior or lose face”. Shao’s perception indicates that the feeling of shame (losing face) resulting from not being able to maintain a more powerful economic status is tied to his personal evaluation of masculine worth. Ming (twenty-one) was more concerned with how to earn the trust of his future parents-in-law: “It’s not just between me and my wife, the marriage is also about pleasing and gaining respect from her parents.” Ming’s narrative underlined how marriage is not simply the union of two individuals, but the wedding of two families. While Shao sought to secure a strong financial status to gain a sense of self-approval and esteem, Ming aspired to win over the trust and respect from his future in-laws. Whatever the reasons may be, the narratives pointed to a sense in which masculine respectability can be thickened by securing a relatively powerful economic status. In this sense, the economic realm continues to be a key site for young men to secure respectable masculinity.

Even as male students were drawn to a normative masculine narrative that included a patriarchal discourse of the gender division of labour, and which continued to valorise men’s definition of respect through the “public” space of paid work, they did not entirely support the view that women’s role is the passive guardian of the home. They acknowledged that women have the rights to pursue their aspirations and establish a career, which may (or may not) eventually lead to them earning more than their husbands. These young men claimed that the denial of women’s freedom is “unattractive” and morally unacceptable. As one student said, “I think girls won’t be attracted to MCPs (male

chauvinist pigs), and I think it's wrong to restrict their freedom to do what they want." Some male students also endorsed a more flexible arrangement in terms of gender roles and division of labour in the future household, mirroring a popular construction of the "sensitive new age man" as an ethically more reasonable way of behaving as a man (see Hudson 2011):

I don't mind doing cooking and housework. I think it's only right that we share the work that needs to be done at home. (Nicholas)

Since I foresee both of us will be working, then we have to split the household chores, cleaning, or next time taking care of baby. But cooking I cannot! (Ming)

One student, Dan (twenty-four), even entertained the possibility of "flipping over" gendered roles and spaces, as he reflected on the dynamics of his current relationship and his own entrepreneurial aspiration. For him, respectability can also be earned by combining the roles of a "house maker" and a "stay home" entrepreneur:

I think I'm a better cook than my girlfriend. I also help her clean her bedroom. So maybe next time she can go out and work, and I stay home be full-time house maker and focus on Internet business. Anyway she's from the local university, so maybe she will earn more!

The narratives of Nicholas, Ming, and Dan suggest that the definition of masculine respectability has already begun to shift beyond the strictures of "traditional" gendered roles and spaces. Even as male students continue to ascribe cultural value to male breadwinning as a mainstream signifier of masculine worth, they are also "pushing away" from this dominant gender regime by drawing on a mixture of practical, moral, and ethical considerations to search for alternative styles of viable masculinity within the contemporary socio-economic and cultural milieu.

### *Respectable femininity*

Female students articulated their investments in degree education through a striking discourse of individual “freedom” and “autonomy”. They view securing a degree as a vital step towards becoming a modern, educated woman, who has a decent career and income, and who can flourish as an individual through her own choices and actions. This is ostensibly for them the hallmark of respectable, successful femininity in contemporary Singapore. These views are captured in a conversation with Heather and Winny, who are both twenty years old:

Heather: I feel that as a female, it’s very important to be independent financially. It never hurts to have two breadwinners in the family, especially given the standard of living here (in Singapore).

Winny: I mean this is already the twenty-first century, there’s already gender equality in Singapore right? So we cannot really discriminate guys and girls, like only the guys go out and work, female stay at home. If that’s the case, why would we want to study for a degree just to stay at home and do housework, right? So basically we need a career to support ourselves. Times have changed. We have the freedom to have our own career, be independent, and prove ourselves.

Young women subscribed to a popular belief in the “de-traditionalisation” of gender norms because “times have changed” and “this is already on the twenty-first century” (in the words of Winny). They appear to have absorbed a set of ideas rooted in a liberal feminist ideal that takes women’s participation in the “public” spheres of the education, paid work, and economy to be a marker of gender equality and “success” (Baker 2010). While these views converge with male students’ acknowledgment that women now have the rights and freedom to pursue educational and work aspirations, suggesting a sense of “progressive” gender re-ordering amongst these students, feminist scholars remind that these “new” forms of post-feminist gender styles can simultaneously entrap women by intensifying their self-regulating practices (Walkerdine 2003; McRobbie 2007).

Joanne's (twenty-two) narrative about her future role and responsibility in work and family life is illustrative. Joanne shared many of the views espoused by Winny and Heather, and described herself as a "career-focused student". She said, "I don't think there is a choice for me to be a stay-home wife, unless I'm marrying a super rich guy who can afford it. For average families, both husband and wife should be contributing to the household income." This statement reveals that even though educated women's participation in paid work is now widely accepted as an exercise of their autonomous rights, the notion of "choice" is illusory as women are now also expected to share the burden of contributing financially to maintaining family life. Whilst Farhan (quoted earlier) had assumed that "it is OK if a woman doesn't want to work and she can stay at home", the reality is that such an option may not exist for many young women, such as Joanne herself.

Some female students mentioned in interviews that women are also subject to the moral gaze if they are not engaged in paid work, even if they are married to a formally employed husband. For example, Mandy (twenty-four) told me "if you can work and choose not to, people will think you just want to live off the man". Her narrative indicates how fresh ideas around gender equality and female independence have combined with conventional expectations of women's role as "wives" to further entrench their positions within a patriarchal order. Others such as Heather pointed that while women are taking up full-time work outside of the home, their perceived role as "housewives" has not changed much, especially in the eye of women of an earlier generation:

Sometimes I go to my boyfriend's house, after dinner if I forget to wash the dishes, auntie (the boyfriend's mother) will look a little unhappy. I think our parents' generation still feels that women belong in the kitchen, need to do housework, wash dishes. If you don't do all these, you are not considered a good wife.

In contrast to the popular belief amongst female students that they have “pushed away” from traditional gender norms, the narratives of Mandy and Heather point to the manner in which contemporary femininities are simultaneously “pulled back” into conventional gender expectations that are being re-staged in the sites of employment and family (McRobbie 2007),

Female students also appear to practice self-regulation by fashioning feminine respectability in the image of a “capable” and “self-sufficient” subject. These young women believed that they should not be overly dependent on men for financial resources. Educational capital for them then is to secure financial independence. A common perception is that financial independence allows women to gain a degree of bargaining power (in consumption), and by extension a measure of respect, in the realms of marriage and family. For instance, Sherm (twenty-three) told me, “if I have the financial means, I don’t need to ask the man for money every time I need to buy something. So I have more say in what to buy.”

For some others, such as Tina (twenty-one), financial independence is understood as a crucial resource to manage potential future risks, such as that of divorce:

It’s important for us [women] to have savings; it’s like a form of insurance. I mean nowadays divorce rate is so high in Singapore. You never know what bad things might happen to your marriage, so you better secure yourself.

While Tina may cultivate a sense of empowerment by building a pool of finance to safeguard herself against the costs of marital dissolution, Peters (2005, 130) cautions that mobilizing education as “a form of private insurance constructed through choice” can mask the contemporary neo-liberal agenda of individualizing risk and responsibility.

Based on my interviews with female students, young women are producing (and earning) respectable forms of femininity through a dominant idea of twenty-first century women's newfound visibility in the spaces of education, work, and consumption. However, their appropriation of educational capital informed by both "traditional" and "liberal" discourses of femininity appear to be progressive and proscriptive at the same time. Hence, their performances of a respectable modern and educated woman need to be interpreted alongside "post-feminist, gender-aware biopolitical practices of new governmentality" (McRobbie 2007, 723).

### **Student performances of "alternative" biopolitics**

Thus far I have shown that young people are navigating a state-led biopolitical mainstream, which binds and normalises education, work and family into citizenship life itself, and in the process reconstituting themselves and classed and gendered subjects. This section focuses on ways in which private degree students are performing biopolitics that may be considered alternative for two reasons. First, they are not entirely aligned to prevailing political rationalities and constitute attempts to interrogate state-led notions of citizenship itself. Second, they are articulated against mainstream norms and representations, whether state-led or not. Based on my research and knowledge of the Singapore context, large-scale overt forms of political actions in higher education – such as protests usually associated with student politics – are almost non-existent. But instead of viewing Singaporean youth as depoliticised citizens, I show how students critically reflect on and subtly negotiate shifting demands of the state's educational biopolitics across different sites and scales.

### ***Critical evaluations***

Private degree students articulate two lines of lay reflections that problematise existing state discourses and political rationalities. The first set of critical reflections unfolded through the

ways students understand the current shift in state discourse around the value of a degree. In the face of increasing graduate under/unemployment rates, the Singaporean government has started to produce a rhetoric that urges young citizens to redefine their unbridled aspirations for degree credentials. Most notably, the Minister for National Development made a bold statement that the university degree is “not vital for success” (Toh 2013, A1). Private degree students expressed mixed feelings about this new social message. Some of them viewed this broadened interpretation of “success” as the mark of a more “progressive” educational regime. Others, however, raised concerns over the readiness of employers to recognise the worth of non-degree holders. For instance, final-year student Chong (twenty-five) exclaimed during interview,

As a private degree holder, I already find it difficult to get a government job. If you look at all the job advertisements, the good jobs are all looking for degree holders. Now they’re telling us degree not important?

Aaron also commented, “They (the government) only encourage us to settle for less because they want only the elites to be university graduates.” This comment reflects a sentiment held by some students that the new rhetoric is part of a broader political maneuvering aimed at producing a class of “mid-skilled”, less well-paid workers for jobs that do not require university graduates. In this context, students became critical commentators of state discourses because the emerging rhetoric is contradicting their “compulsory” investment in higher education as a site for ethical self-realization.

The second line of critiques emerged from private degree students’ frustrations with the paradoxical nature of their educational capital. As future worker-citizens who are educated within an allegedly meritocratic environment, students have cultivated a sense of entitlement to “full participation” in the economy as a reward for their personal hard work and perseverance in scaling the educational ladder. Students defined full participation as an

unencumbered access to employment opportunities in both government and private sectors, as well as a non-discriminatory assessment of their economic value as individual workers in the labour market. But in reality, young people's experiences of activating their cultural capital often disrupt this neo-liberal construction of citizenship entitlements. For instance, several graduating students cited encounters with potential employers who attempted to undercut their starting wages based on the fact that they were not studying in local public universities. The experiences of these students corresponded with an employment survey conducted in 2012 by a private educational institute, which found that its graduates earned a monthly salary of a few hundred dollars less than their peers from public universities across both public and private job sectors (Davie 2012). The students interpret these practices by the employers as a form of inequality that contradicts the egalitarian aspect of meritocracy. For them, this begs the question of the extent to which meritocracy indeed promises equality of opportunity.

In the case of access to employment opportunities, students frequently quote anecdotes of rejected applications for government jobs and "second-class" job offers at campus-organised career fairs as evidences of their alienation from equal rights to employment. This is illustrated by the case of Chong, who had already started searching for jobs when I met him in early 2013:

The government sector doesn't give equal recognition for private university degrees and local university degrees. My own experience says a lot. I never got a single reply out of the dozens of applications I sent out. And then the career fair for us, the only jobs you see from government sector booths are like telemarketers or those low level executive jobs in the statutory boards. Both are degrees, why this unfair treatment, just because we are private degree holders?

Chong's narrative reflects a prevalent belief among private degree students that employers in the government sector do not value their degree credentials. As a result, some students

were compelled to give up their search for job opportunities in the government sector and instead turned to the private sector job market. These students tend to construct the private sector labour market as a more “egalitarian” site in which emphasis is placed on worker skills and abilities rather than on educational qualifications.

The students’ lay reflections show that they do not passively inhabit the space of private education. Instead, they draw on personal frustrations with maintaining the value of their cultural capital to produce critical commentaries on state ideologies. Although these critiques reveal signs of how students are concurrently “pulled back” into the neoliberal mainstream, such critical sensibilities should not be discounted as “apolitical”. Rather, their capacity to talk about and reason out those norms that are interrupting their routine habits exemplifies how “norms are acted upon that goes beyond a simplistic opposition of conformity or resistance” (Barnett et al. 2008, 647). This suggests perhaps the often “impure” ways in which biopolitical alternatives are produced.

### ***Inventing hope***

Private degree students frequently reflect on their education as a source of hope, albeit also understanding it as a form of “necessary evil”. For instance, Jingfen believed that she had to make do with circumstances and draw on available resources to secure a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle in the future, even if this had meant settling for a degree of “lesser” value:

No fish, prawns also not bad (a colloquial Singaporean English phrase that means “settling for a lesser alternative”). We are living in an expensive country, and we never know what will happen in the future. So if we want to live comfortably, not having to worry about paying bills and basic necessities, we need a degree at least for a start.

Similarly, Aaron (twenty-four) criticised the way in which the education system is rigid and “unforgiving” but at the same time infuses a measure of hope into his narrative:

This is the life of Singaporean, the system is very unforgiving, and there is nothing we can do about it. We didn't do well enough to get the better deal so now we just got to make do with the private degree. It's better than nothing!

Like many other students, both Jingfen and Aaron emphasised the importance of being resourceful and adaptable to shifting circumstances in order to create viable lives in the future – an indication of being “pulled into” the state construct of prudent citizen-subject. Indeed, scholars have cautioned that young people's capability to mobilise and make do with resources is often tied to the broader regime of self-governmentality (Allen et al. 2013). It is also important to appreciate, however, how their resourcefulness enables them to overcome life's challenges. In this instance, the act of hoping itself moves beyond class and gender relations, and represents a subtle way that students are breathing life into an otherwise gloomy account of private degree education as “second chance” resource. Moreover, students are not becoming optimistic in a clueless manner as their narratives are incorporated with critical views of the state and their social situations. The elements of discontent and frustration in their hopeful expressions point to the evaluative, rather than naïve, invention of everyday hope.

Private degree students' shrewd ability to inscribe hope into their educational lives was further made apparent during midpoint of my fieldwork. In late 2012, the Singaporean government announced that part of the private institute would be restructured into the city-state's sixth publicly funded national university. Many students felt that, given a “proper” recognition, private degree education at least for their institute will be more valued. For instance, a student commented, “now that we are also recognised as a proper university, I think perceptions will definitely change for the better.” To this end, students' hope are

connected to their continual striving for self-esteem and a measure of worthiness (see Kraftl 2008). The institute also undertook an upgrading project in 2013 to develop and expand its existing campus infrastructure as part of the restructuring plan. Some students have found new developments in the campus space to be “exciting” and “stimulating”, and drew on such sentiments to articulate a renewed sense of vibrant hopefulness into their educational lives:

The new lecture theatre looks like a spaceship! I think all these changes make the campus much more stimulating for learning! (Sherm)

It’s good they are upgrading the campus with new blocks. At least we’ll look more like a university now! (Jia)

Students’ feelings of excitement and stimulation about their educational situations draw attention, first and foremost, to the manner in which acts of hoping are a quotidian, routine part of everyday life (Anderson and Fenton 2008). They also point to the significance of non-human materialities (i.e., campus built environment) in constituting emotional responses that kindle hope. These underscore the ways in which hope emerge from particular encounters between bodies and their socio-material environments, rather than being a social prescription (Anderson 2006). What the student narratives further reveal is the centrality of a youthful “reflexivity of simply being in the world, coping, and living” in the present (Kraftl 2008, 87). This reflexive way of feeling and acting represents a concrete act of “pushing away” from mainstream sensibilities about private degree education as a hopeless, “second chance” educational route, as well as from the neoliberal tendency to valorise future orientations.

### ***Modest activism***

While the previous two accounts of student biopolitics take place at the scale of the individual, I offer here a quick glimpse into how students “hang together” in a non-

individualised manner through online spaces to perform alternative biopolitics. While researching on the Internet in late 2014, I found a commentary co-written by Daniel, a student I encountered during fieldwork, and his friend in a local online newspaper.<sup>3</sup> The commentary highlighted a stigma attached to private degree education and argued that the state, employers, and general public need to dispel existing stereotypical views. I circulated the commentary by “sharing” it on my Facebook webpage, which quickly garnered a thread of comments, mostly written by research participants whom I had added on the social networking site as “friends”. The thread of about just over thirty comments turned into a creative dialogue around the Singapore education system, the “paper-chase” phenomenon, possible ways to end the stigmatization, and viewpoints that attempt to contest negative stereotypes of private degree education. While some of these contestations are premised on mainstream debates over the economic values of private degree versus public university degree credentials, others distinctly “pushed away” from these neoliberal definitions of education and emphasised the virtue of learning as a non-economically motivated life project:

The purpose of higher education is to learn, gain knowledge for its own sake. If we keep harping on the degree’s worth, we can never escape the hierarchy.

Education should be for education’s sake. Most universities are now factories, producing graduates for the workforce. The perception of getting a degree needs to change in the first place, not a change in perception of public versus private degrees.

Students’ use of online space points to the Internet (and in particular, social media) as a potential site where kindred voices of the students can “hang together”, even if provisionally, to resemble a form of modest activism (Horton and Kraftl 2009). It is not my intention to claim that online spaces are more democratic and conducive for fostering alternative political thoughts and actions, not least because a more detailed analysis of online student politics is outside the remit of my research (e.g., Zielig and Ansell 2008).

Rather, I simply wish to underscore how the online environment appeared to have provided students a networked space where they talked about and exchanged critical ideas as a non-individualised, collective cluster of actors. In doing so, their activist dispositions, otherwise rarely observed in the actual space of the campus, are brought to the foreground. This anecdote not only points to the need for critical focus on student performances of “online” political agency, but also to the often unintentional and non-spectacular ways in which activism emerges in spaces beyond the immediate campus environment.

### **Conclusions**

In this article, I have proposed for greater attention to biopolitics in the burgeoning research on student geographies of higher education. By incorporating theoretical insights from biopolitics of childhood and education (Katz 2001; 2008; Kraftl 2015), with a focus on how biopower plays out in the lives of private degree students as citizens, I have argued that critical analyses of “mainstream” and “alternative” biopolitics need to acknowledge the necessity of social reproduction and its attendant relations of class and gender. Specifically, I have demonstrated how the state and students themselves are producing biopolitics in ways that attempt to define and redefine what constitutes a viable life in the city-state. In doing so, I advance two critical contributions to existing research on student geographies of higher education.

My case study adds empirical flesh to the much-needed analysis of higher education’s role in “gender-differentiated processes of middle-class reproduction” (Holloway, O’Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson 2012, 2292). To this end, I have shown that young men and women make use of educational capital to realise different styles of gender performances and to negotiate differently gendered roles and responsibilities of family life in order to achieve respectable forms of life. Furthermore, in deploying a biopolitical analysis of gender subjection and

invention, I pointed to the ways students are shifting some of these norms to articulate alternative and viable gender styles, rather than simply conforming to mainstream state-led gender and heterosexual regimes even if they are largely “compulsory”. In addition to “[tracing] the ways in which gender and attitudes to family life... matter to the realization” of educational capital (Holloway, O’Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson 2012, 2292), future research can explore the extent to which young men and women attempt to redefine (and not just realise) their classed and gendered life projects through education. Biopolitical theorisations around gender performativity, subversion, and invention (e.g., Butler 1997), currently missing from existing works on geographies of students in higher education, lend critical value to this agenda.

In addition, I have explored higher education students’ biopolitical performances in different stylistic and spatial modes. These performances produce critical commentaries on state discourses and ideologies; they invent everyday forms of hope and optimism to counteract an otherwise negatively construed educational environment; and they participate in non-individualised politics, even if provisionally, through online spaces. These delicate expressions of youth agency and political acts stand in stark contrast to the overtly resistant forms of higher education student politics hitherto explored in geographical writings (e.g., Silvey 2004; Hopkins and Todd 2015). Re-conceptualizing student politics as bio-politics to include those bodily and affective modes of acting differently opens up new opportunities to broaden the range of student practices and spaces that might be considered political. In this aspect, fresh perspectives can be found in existing efforts to re-theorise young people’s political agency in the broader scholarship on geographies of children and youth (Skelton 2010; Jeffrey 2011; Häkli and Kallio 2013). New and exciting theoretical emphases around emotion/affect, non-spectacular and banal acts, as well as non-human materialities in constituting political projects serve as important resources to help geographers work

through the challenges of searching for political acts in highly pedagogical state and educational regimes. Additionally, the vital question of how a biopolitics of youth might be different from a biopolitics of childhood remains important for further consideration.

This article also offers an initial engagement with Kraftl's (2015) call for scholars to explore alternative biopolitical regimes and performances in (mainstream) education spaces, specifically by using private higher education in Singapore as a test bed for examining the theorisation of “alternative” versus “mainstream” biopolitics. To this end, I have argued that attempts to read for biopolitical alternatives will require an attention to the material grounds on which they are being negotiated. I have found that young people who are engaging with life-making in the “biopolitical mainstream” can also re-make, re-invent and carve out ways to think and act differently (i.e. alternatively). Students’ critical sensibilities, acts of hoping, and implicit activism represent some under-explored forms of biopolitical acts for future research, especially on the spatial and temporal dimensions of young people’s political agency. I also pointed out at various points in the article that “mainstream” and “alternative” articulations are not always clearly discernible – a caveat maintained by Kraftl (2015). Instead of searching for distinct “mainstream” and/or “alternative” biopolitical projects, another way of imagining how students perform biopolitics is by looking at how they are simultaneously “pulled into” and “pushing away” from dominant state and educational regimes.

Finally, the case study presented in this article constitutes one emerging education space in the ongoing globalization and transformation of higher education. Critical analyses of biopolitical configurations need to address student practices across a broader range of higher learning and education spaces, including but not limited to (transnational) universities, vocational institutes, and online distance learning. Taking on this expanded

agenda will help deepen comparative understandings of the biopolitical geographies of student life.

## Notes

1. <http://sgyounginvestment.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/how-much-money-do-you-need-to-own.html> (last accessed on 21 April 2015)
2. For further discussion on how the Singaporean state produces a moral consensus that normalises marriage and family as a routinised aspect of citizenship, see Teo (2012).
3. <http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/taking-stigma-out-private-tertiary-education> (last accessed 25 April 2015)

## References

- Abelmann, N., S. J. Park, and H. Kim. 2009. College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10 (2):229-247.
- Allen, K., J. Quinn, S. Hollingworth, and A. Rose. 2013. Becoming employable students and “ideal” creative workers: exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (3):431–452.
- Anderson, B. 2006. Becoming and being hopeful: towards a theory of affect. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (5):733–752.
- . 2012. Affect and biopower: towards a politics of life. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37 (1):28–43.
- Anderson, B., and J. Fenton. 2008. Editorial introduction: spaces of hope. *Space and Culture* 11 (2):76–80.
- Anagnost, A. 2013. Introduction: life-making in neoliberal times. In *Global Futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy in Uncertain Times*, eds. A. Anagnost, A. Arai, and H. Ren, 1–28. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Andersson, J., J. Sadgrove, and G. Valentine. 2012. Consuming campus : geographies of encounter at a British university. *Social & Cultural Geography* 13 (5):501–515.
- Baker, J. 2010. Great expectations and post-feminist accountability: young women living up to the “successful girls” discourse. *Gender and Education* 22 (1):1–15.
- Barnett, C., N. Clarke, P. Cloke, and A. Malpass. 2008. The elusive subjects of neo-liberalism. *Cultural Studies* 22 (5):624-653.

- Barr, M., and Z. Skrbiš. 2008. *Constructing Singapore: elitism, ethnicity and the nation-building project*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Braun, B. 2007. Biopolitics and the molecularization of life. *Cultural Geographies* 14 (1):6–28.
- Brown, P., H. Lauder., and D. Ashton. 2011. *The global auction: the broken promises of education, jobs and incomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, J. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chatterton, P. 2010. The student city: an ongoing story of neoliberalism, gentrification, and commodification introduction: the student city grows up. *Environment and Planning A* 42:509–514.
- Cheng, Y. 2014. Time protagonists: student migrants, practices of time, and cultural construction of the Singapore-educated person. *Social & Cultural Geography* 15 (4):385–405.
- Christie, H. 2007. Higher education and spatial (im)mobility: nontraditional students and living at home. *Environment and Planning A* 39 (10):2445–2463.
- Davie, S. 2011. Over 100,000 S'poreans seek degrees at private schools. *The Straits Times* 17 Oct: A1.
- . 2012. 40% of each cohort to get shot at local universities. *The Straits Times* 27 August: A1 & A6.
- Davidson, E. 2008. Marketing the self: the politics of aspiration among middle-class Silicon Valley youth. *Environment and Planning A* 40 (12):2814–2830.
- Dillon, M. 2007. Governing through contingency: the security of biopolitical governance. *Political Geography* 26 (1):41–47.
- Häkli, J., and K. P. Kallio. 2013. Subject, action and polis: theorizing political agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2):181–200.
- Hinton, D. 2011. “Wales is my home”: higher education aspirations and student mobilities in Wales. *Children's Geographies* 9 (1):23–34.
- Holdsworth, C. 2009a. “Going away to uni”: mobility, modernity, and independence of English higher education students. *Environment and Planning A* 41 (8):1849–1864.
- . 2009b. Between two worlds: local students in higher education and “scouse”/student identities. *Population, Space and Place* 15 (3):225–237.
- Holloway, S. L., S. L. O'Hara, and H. Pimlott-Wilson. 2012. Educational mobility and the gendered geography of cultural capital: the case of international student flows between Central Asia and the UK. *Environment and Planning A* 44 (9):2278–2294.

- Holton, M. 2015. Adapting relationships with place: investigating the evolving place attachment and “sense of place” of UK higher education students during a period of intense transition. *Geoforum* 59:21–29.
- . 2014. The geographies of UK university halls of residence: examining students’ embodiment of social capital. *Children’s Geographies* Advanced online publication: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14733285.2014.979134>.
- Holton, M., and M. Riley. 2013. Student geographies: exploring the diverse geographies of students and higher education. *Geography Compass* 7 (1):61–74.
- Hoffman, L. M. 2010. *Patriotic professionalism in urban China: Fostering talent*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,: Temple University Press.
- Hopkins, P. 2011. Towards critical geographies of the university campus: understanding the contested experiences of Muslim students. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (1):157–169.
- . 2006. Youth transitions and going to university: the perceptions of students attending a geography summer school access programme. *Area* 38 (3):240–247.
- Hopkins, P., and L. Todd. 2015. Creating an intentionally dialogic space: student activism and the Newcastle Occupation 2010. *Political Geography*, 46: 31-40.
- Horton, J., and P. Kraftl. 2009. Small acts , kind words and “not too much fuss”: implicit activism. *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (1):14–23.
- Hudson, C. 2011. From rugged individual to dishy dad: reinventing masculinity in Singapore. *Genders* 54:Online.
- Jeffrey, C. 2011. Geographies of children and youth II: global youth agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2):245–253.
- . 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Katz, C. 2008. Childhood as spectacle : relays of anxiety and the reconfiguration of the child. *Cultural Geographies* 15 (1):5–17.
- . 2004. *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2001. Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode* 33 (4):709–728.
- Kraftl, P. 2015. Alter-childhoods: biopolitics and childhoods in alternative education spaces. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (1):219–237.
- . 2008. Young people, hope, and childhood-hope. *Space and Culture* 11 (2):81–92.

- Legg, S. 2005. Foucault's population geographies: classifications, biopolitics and governmental spaces. *Population, Space and Place* 11 (3):137–156.
- Lemke, T. 2005. A zone of indistinction? A critique of Giorgio Agamben's concept of biopolitics. *Outlines: Critical Social Studies* 7 (1):3-13.
- . 2002. Foucault, governmentality, and critique. *Rethinking Marxism* 14 (3):49-64.
- McRobbie, A. 2007. TOP GIRLS? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. *Cultural Studies* 21 (4-5):718-737.
- Mitchell, K. 2006. Neoliberal governmentality in the European Union: education, training, and technologies of citizenship. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (3):389–407.
- . 2003. Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (4):387–403.
- MOE (Ministry of Education). 2012. *Report on the committee on university education pathways beyond 2015: final report*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- MOM (Ministry of Manpower). 2013. *Singapore Yearbook of Manpower Statistics, 2013*. Singapore: Ministry of Manpower.
- Ong, A. 2007. Neoliberalism as a mobile technology. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (1):3–8.
- Oswin, N. 2010. The modern model family at home in Singapore: a queer geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2):256–268.
- Peters, M. 2005. The new prudentialism in education: actuarial rationality and the entrepreneurial self. *Educational Theory* 55 (2):123–137.
- Pykett, J. 2010. Introduction: the pedagogical state: education, citizenship, governing. *Citizenship Studies* 14 (6):617–619.
- Ramdas, K. 2014. Is blood thicker than water? Single Indian Singaporean women and the geographies of “being” family. *Gender, Place & Culture* 22 (2):255–270.
- Rose, N. 1999. *Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self*. London: Free Association Books.
- Ruddick, S. 2003. The politics of aging: globalization and the restructuring of youth and childhood. *Antipode* 35 (2):334–362.
- Sidhu, R., K. C. Ho, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2011. Emerging education hubs: the case of Singapore. *Higher Education* 61 (1):23–40.
- Silvey, R. 2004. A wrench in the global works: anti-sweatshop activism on campus. *Antipode* 36 (2):191-197.

- Skelton, T. 2010. Taking young people as political actors seriously: opening the borders of political geography. *Area* 42 (2):145–151.
- Smith, D. P. 2009. “Student geographies”, urban restructuring, and the expansion of higher education. *Environment and Planning A* 41:1795–1804.
- Smith, S. H. 2012. “In the heart, there’s nothing”: unruly youth, generational vertigo and territory. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (4):572–585.
- Tan, K. P. 2012. The ideology of pragmatism: neo-liberal globalisation and political authoritarianism in Singapore. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42 (1):67–92.
- . 2008. Meritocracy and elitism in a global city: ideological shifts in Singapore. *International Political Science Review* 29 (1):7–27.
- Teo, Y. 2011. *Neoliberal morality in Singapore: how family policies make state and society*. New York: Routledge.
- Toh, Y. H. 2013. University degree 'not vital for success': Khaw Boon Wan. *The Straits Times* 5 May: A1.
- Walkerdine, V. 2003. Reclassifying upward mobility: femininity and the neo-liberal subject. *Gender and Education* 15 (3):237–248.
- Waring, P. 2013. Singapore’s global schoolhouse strategy: retreat or recalibration? *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (5):874–884.
- Waters, J., R. Brooks, and H. Pimlott-Wilson. 2011. Youthful escapes? British students, overseas education and the pursuit of happiness. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (5):455–469.
- Waters, J., and M. Leung. 2014. “These are not the best students”: continuing education, transnationalisation and Hong Kong’s young adult “educational non-elite.” *Children’s Geographies* 12 (1):56–69.
- Ye, R., and E. Nylander. 2015. The transnational track: state sponsorship and Singapore’s Oxbridge elite. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (1):11–33.
- Zeilig, L., and N. Ansell. 2008. Spaces and scales of African student activism: Senegalese and Zimbabwean university students at the intersection of campus, nation and globe. *Antipode* 40 (1):31–54.

## **Learning in Neoliberal Times: Private Degree Students and the Politics of Value (Trans)coding in Singapore**

### **Abstract**

Drawing on fieldwork carried out between 2013 and 2014 in Singapore, I offer a case study of how students are shaped by and pushing back against neoliberal discourses, by focusing on the ethnographic context of a local private education institute. Drawing on theorizations around the corporeal politics of value, this article examines the actual production of neoliberal subjectivities in light of a new rhetoric around the “learning citizen” in the globalising city-state. I demonstrate how private degree students engaged with practices of value-coding that attempt to fashion themselves into “employable” future workers, but in ways that are informed by a different circulation of value meanings. These value practices – often defensive, anti-elitist, and subversive of a dominant subject of value (i.e. the “proper” university student) – were aimed at recuperating and creating a separate domain of value-worth. I argue that the actual production of neoliberal citizenship in education spaces need to be (re-)interpreted through a politics of value (trans)coding. This allows for a clearer view of how students themselves negotiate embodied forms of value, with and against those practices of alienation and exclusion that mark them as human capital. *Key Words: neoliberal education, youth, value coding, human capital, Singapore*

### **Introduction**

Recent years have seen a new level of geographical interest in the relationship between education, state, and citizenship formation in the contemporary globalising and neoliberal moment (Mitchell 2006; Pykett 2010; Gagen 2013). One particular theme is on how global economic and neoliberal restructuring are rapidly changing young people’s understandings of the value of education and learning (Ruddick 2003; Katz 2008). In many parts of the world, governments, parents, and young people themselves envision formal education as a central tool for promoting social mobility through improved employment prospects (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004). At the same time, international organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund believe that the key to achieving economic growth and recuperating the post-crisis economy lies in improving labour productivity and efficiency (Davies and Bansel 2007). This has resulted in a growing emphasis on formal education as a vital site for moulding human capital to meet the demands of the shifting global economy. Under such circumstances, critical theorists and commentators have variously argued that new political-economic priorities driven by an increasingly laissez-faire economy has

transformed education and learning into commodities to be traded in the marketplace (Olssen and Peters 2005; Peters 2009; Gerrard 2014). Some also warned of how neoliberal rationalities are extending into the realm of the subjectivity, transforming students into calculative consumers with a penchant for competition, individualisation, and self-responsibilisation (Giroux 2003; Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon 2007).

In this article, I offer an ethnographic case study of how students are shaped by and pushing back against neoliberal discourses promoted by state projects aimed at cultivating citizen-subjects in the realm of education, by focusing on the ethnographic context of a local private educational institute in Singapore. My definition of “neoliberalism” lies at the intersection between a neo-Marxist and a Foucauldian governmentality perspectives, both of which provide insights to higher educational restructuring in Singapore. While the former reading of neoliberalism explicitly links contemporary marketisation and privatisation of educational policies to the broader workings of capital through ideological reinforcements, an interpretation of neoliberalism as governmentality is more concerned with those sites and techniques through which individuals become self-governing subjects (Larner 2000). Specifically, I underscore an emerging move by the Singaporean state towards the cultivation of self-activated “learning citizen” in the rhetoric around higher education, as a response to the global restructuring of knowledge and labour markets. The key purpose of this article is to examine the actual production of neoliberal subjectivities in light of this discursive shift, through the lens of a segment of Singaporean youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five studying for their first degree at an institute of higher learning, otherwise known as “private degree students”. This particular institute offers a range of educational programs spanning across social sciences to business and marketing. But its main vision is aimed at cultivating employable and industry-ready professional workers. This distinct goal of the private institute, and to a large extent across many others with a

focus on professional education programs, lends itself as a productive site for examining how students invest in themselves as human capital and negotiate “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 353).

Bringing focus onto the spatialities of “one small place” (Laurie 2012, 500) as the locus of investigation, this article develops a specific account of young lives negotiating the broader constellation of power structures pressing on them in a time of neoliberal change. Building on Anagnost's (2004) theorisation around the corporeal politics of value and human quality, I demonstrate how private degree students are pushed to strive for a form of citizenship that requires an intensive consumption of education, marked by personal efforts to market the self as well-prepared, viable, and unique workers to future employers. They do this as part of a broader representational politics that code certain bodies as more or less valuable as a future source of labour, or what (Skeggs 2011, 503) termed the “classed bio-politics of human as capital”. Private degree students, however, also fashion themselves according to a different circulation of value meanings. This separate circuit of value practices and meanings simultaneously exist alongside and circumvent the dominant subject of value as embodied within the “higher quality” public university student.

### **Education, human capital, and the politics of value (trans)coding**

Contemporary research on the neoliberal politics of human capital formation has demonstrated the ways in which students are produced and producing themselves for global knowledge economies. For instance, Liu's (2008, 203) study has demonstrated how middle-class youth and families in China have absorbed the neoliberal state discourse of *suzhi* (quality of life), leading to their search for credentials as well as other “complementary strategies” such as becoming a member of the Party in order to gain prestige and mobility in their career. Urciuoli (2008) added that, apart from state disseminated discourses,

educational institutions are also actively involved in enrolling students into thinking of themselves as bundles of skills to be traded in the labour market. The observation that credentials are no longer enough to secure future prospects is also reflected in Davidson's (2008) ethnographic research that examined middle-class students' strategies of self-cultivation at becoming "marketable" subjects in Silicon Valley. She found that these young people were disciplining and defining themselves through notions of success tied to "liberal" ideals, such as authentic passions and freedom of expression. In the context of South Korea, young college students were also found to be valorising autonomy and individualism as markers of a "successful student" and desirable subjecthood in the contemporary global marketplace (Abelmann, Park and Kim 2009). These writings reflect wider critiques about higher educational institutions as a vital social field in which neoliberal technologies operate, by encouraging citizens to "seek introspection, self-mastery, and personal fulfillment" in the marketplace, as well as to embrace the idea that "capital accumulation is not an end in itself, but a means of reinvention" (Freeman 2011, 356).

Ethnographic research has also pointed to how neoliberal production of human capital is premised on a politics of class-based inclusion and exclusion (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004; Waters 2006). For example in a study of higher educational work placement practices in the UK, Allen et al. (2013, 10) found that the way in which young people fashion themselves in the image of the neoliberal creative worker "is located within systems of classification that work in the interests of the privileged". Middle-class youth often found themselves more confident and comfortable inhabiting the cosmopolitan subjectivity of the creative worker than their working-class counterpart (see also Allen and Hollingworth 2013). What this suggests is the privileging of an elitist and middle-class ethos that is embedded within neoliberal discourses of human capital. But even for middle-class youth who appear to profit from neoliberal practices of accumulation, their relentless pursuit of

cultural capital through education has led to an intensification of stress and pressure (Davidson 2008; Liu 2008). These studies demonstrated the manner in which embodied differences and localised practices intersect with neoliberalising education in ways that exacerbate, rather than alleviate, existing relations of alienation and privilege.

Additionally, three critical insights about “actually existing neoliberalism” have emerged from these culturally sensitive political economic analyses of education. First, neoliberalism touches down into the everyday life of different people at different places in conversation with existing state disciplinary regimes, cultural logics, and subject positions (Castree 2006; Ong 2007). There is never a singular narrative of neoliberalism, but only multiple neoliberal logics that always emerge in relation to on-the-ground social relations, thereby generating subjectivities that are relational and interactive (Kipnis 2011). Second, the fields in and through which neoliberalism is played out are thoroughly shot through with tensions around class and privilege. Third, young people do not absorb neoliberal discourses passively, but rather draw on them to develop strategies to rework their misrecognitions and identities. Therefore, young people are both subjects *and* actors who are investing in their own social reproduction through a complex biopolitics of “pushing away” from while being “pulled back” into neoliberal state and educational regimes (see Cheng 2015).

If middle-class social reproduction through educational investment has become ever more intensified under the current neoliberal ethos, what of those who engage with social reproduction from different material grounds and normative concerns? Skeggs (2014) has argued that in many contemporary writings about the so-called actual neoliberal production of middle-class subjects, there is a tendency for practices of appropriation, resistance, and invention to be interpreted through a notion of exchange-value. She showed how people who inhabit a separate field of material relations, such as working-class men and women,

can produce autonomous values that are not subject to governing discourses centered around middle-class desires and aspirations (Skeggs 2011). Making a somewhat similar critique, Barnett et al. (2008, 633) argued theories of neoliberal governmentality inadequately explain how social practices may be freed up from the “overbearing discourses and technologies of subjection”. Writing about the neoliberal politics of human value/quality in China, Anagnost (2004, 189) demonstrated through the figures of the urban middle-class only child and the rural migrant that “the representation of value has undergone a reorganization in the realm of the biopolitical in which human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation”. She argued that the notion of value/quality could be understood as “a means for following the transcoding of inequalities that simultaneously operates in the production of economic, social, political and affective value” (Anagnost 2004, 192). However, her analysis is underwritten by a definition of value that is ultimately submerged into a neoliberal framework that privileges the state’s neoliberal politics and representational power.

There is now a modestly growing pool of studies that explore those everyday practices that attempt to re-code the subject of value, and in the process negotiate different senses of belonging (Kipnis 2007; 2011; see also Kraftl 2015). For instance, Woronov (2011) argued, using a case study of Chinese urban youth in vocational education, that despite being drawn into an emergent structural class location in contemporary China, these young people never conceded to being a segment of “failed” youth. Instead, they produced their own moral discourses of human value and worth based on dignity and esteem. Skeggs (2011, 503) proposed that people positioned in a different time-space vector in relation to capital produce “claims for value [that] were not acquisitive”, but were “defensive, against moral denigration and misrecognition, [and] protectionist”. When the concept of value is read alongside these studies, young people’s narratives and practices around neoliberal self-

fashioning can be re-evaluated for performances that go against the grain of a seemingly all-pervasive neoliberalism.

In this article, I suggest that the concept of value provides a new language to investigate the classed biopolitics of subjection and invention yet to be registered in geographical scholarship on neoliberalisation, education, and youth. Specifically, I propose that the notion of “value (trans)coding” is not only useful for tracing the transcoding of inequalities around human capital production; it also directs critical attention to how coding practices involve the translation of value meanings: people “make sense of, legitimate and give direction to value and circuits of value” (Lee 2006, 419) as they emerge from different sets of socio-spatial relations. Based on this understanding, I examine how students in a private educational institute attempt to code and recode value to their own bodies vis-à-vis others, and in ways that both align to and push away from the dominant representation and subject of value in contemporary Singapore.

### **Education and self-activated “learning citizen”**

Singapore provides an illuminating focus to understand the representational politics of value in the neoliberalising spaces of education and learning. Education has been a key pillar in the city-state’s projects of nation-building, economic development, and globalisation (Gopinathan 2007). Since post-independence in the 1980s, the state has given weight to the stance that the nation’s productive capacity needs to be calibrated accordingly to shifting regional and global economic forces. Under the knowledge-based and innovation-driven global economic restructuring in the 1990s, Singapore’s education system gave exceptional weight to the cultivation of “thinking” and “learning” citizen-subjects. This is enshrined in the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” (TSLN) initiative introduced in 1997 with the key objective of nurturing a generation of school leavers with a

whole new set of skills, including innovation, creativity and flexibility. Goh Chok Tong, who was then the Prime Minister, asserted that this vision was “a formula to enable Singapore to compete and stay ahead” (cited in Gopinathan 2007, 60) in a rapidly evolving economy. Under this vision, the educational priority was to ensure that young people acquire a disposition for independent learning and to constantly upgrade themselves with market-relevant knowledge, skills, and sensibilities. In order to create a seamless match between the supply and demand of labour, the city-state’s education system was highly integrated across primary, secondary and tertiary levels to produce the “right” amount of vocational and knowledge workers. Tasked with the role of producing the nation’s high-quality knowledge workers, the higher education sector is especially managed by the state through a careful calibration of participation rates, so as to maintain a “good fit” between the university graduate labour and the needs of the economy (MOE 2012).

The global economic crisis in the late 2000s has led to an increase in un/under-employment rates and skills mismatch in Singapore, causing widespread anxieties among young people with regard to the convertibility of their credentials into desired employment. These anxieties were also compounded by a shrinkage in middle-class jobs in the Professional, Managerial and Executive (PME) sector, a booming supply of university graduate labour, and perceived competition from highly skilled immigrant workers and students, i.e. “foreign talent” (see Yang 2014). Pressed with the challenge of creating sufficient PME jobs for the expanding number of youth graduating with higher educational credentials, the Singaporean state turned to intensify its efforts in the Continuing Education and Training (CET) plans, in its promotion of entrepreneurship among young people, and a newly introduced national incentive programme called SkillsFuture.<sup>1</sup> All these efforts constitute a broader neoliberal project that encourages citizens to embrace a model of human capital that would take charge of his/her own development in a volatile economic world. Under this latest round of

educational restructuring, the concept of education and learning takes on the new accent of self-actualisation through a moral investment in work ethic.

The Singaporean government was already emphasising the values of flexibility, adaptability, and resilience in its formulation of a good and strong workforce ethos during the nation's formative years as an industrialising country. These values were constituted through the founding ideologies of meritocracy and pragmatism that "sought to socialise Singaporeans into disciplined, hardworking, productive, efficient and docile worker-consumer subjects" (Tan 2012, 84). These work values were further sedimented by the national rhetoric that produces Singapore as a small island-state with only its people as the vital natural resource. More recently, the Prime Minister Lee (2008) asserted that "workers have to continually pick up new skills and knowledge. No matter how useful the skills and qualifications we attain in school are when we graduate, they will become steadily less relevant over time". This speech not only calls upon Singaporeans to embrace education as a means to become workers and to develop a disposition for constantly improving the self as a worker. It also reiterates the notions of flexibility and adaptability as key to how Singaporeans can navigate the changing demands of the economy and labour market.

Over the last two decades, local tertiary institutions such as polytechnics and universities have undergone reforms focused on building new networks, alliances, and physical infrastructure as part of the government's aim to transform Singapore into a global education hub (Collins et al. 2014; Sidhu, Ho and Yeoh 2011). In addition to transforming the local public universities into global centres of research and innovation excellence, the government also encouraged the privatisation of higher education by attracting new players into the educational market (Waring 2013). Private higher education in Singapore has somewhat been absent within the broader mainstream state and public discourse around

higher learning. The idea of a “university education” or “university student” – the key image of value in the knowledge and innovation economies – has been tied to the publicly-funded degree-awarding institutions (i.e. local public universities) throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. It was only until recently that private degree education rose to prominence, in part due to increased media coverage on the closure of several private universities such as the University of New South Wales, incidents around fake degree mills, and a rapidly growing student population enrolled into private degree education. It was also during this period that the Council of Private Education was set up in 2009 to oversee and regulate the private education sector. In the 2012 university expansion plan, the government more explicitly acknowledged that private educational institutes “play a role in complementing the public university sector, by injecting greater course diversity and supporting workforce development” (MOE 2012, 9). Additionally, for the first time in Singapore, the government recommended subsidised full-time degree programs with a core focus on industry-relevant curriculum to be implemented at a private institute of higher education: Singapore Private Institute (SPI).

### **Ethnographic locus of research**

By 2012, there was already an estimated 47,500 Singaporeans enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes across all private institutes. Half of this population is comprised of young people between the ages of 21 and 25. The sheer amount of private degree students is thrown into sharper relief when compared to just about 45,000 Singaporeans enrolled into the local public universities. SPI was the largest private educational institute in the city-state, with an estimated enrolment of 30,000 local students.<sup>2</sup> SPI offers both part-time and full-time degree programs that cater to working adults, fresh A-level and diploma graduates, as well as short-term “upgrading” or “top-up” programs for people who wish to upgrade their existing credentials. Since 2012, SPI also strengthened its own brand capital by building

upon on its longstanding reputation as an institute for vocational-oriented education. The institute actively promoted the newly introduced applied degree programmes and intensified its marketing messages centred around a focus on imparting industry-relevant knowledge and professional skills to students. Emphasis was also given to preparing students for a “head start” in their career and an “edge” in the prevailing competitive job market. These messages were being featured prominently on SPI’s revamped website (“Get an edge in today’s competitive job market”/“Get a head start in your career”) as well as disseminated through posters and brochures all over the campus, at selected bus stops, and even train stations. The impact of these marketing messages and images was most deeply felt at two SPI Open House events that I attended over the course of fieldwork. During these events, the concourse of the campus was transformed into a staged “marketplace” for the selling and buying of an educational vision centred on realising professional career aspirations, forging competitive players in the job market, and bridging students into the “realities” of the working world.

The bulk of my fieldwork involved multiple visits to the campus, where I interacted with students opportunistically. On a typical visit, I spent about three hours walking around the campus and approaching students to start a conversation. While I adopted a principle of openness and inclusivity in terms of whom to speak to during fieldwork, a large proportion of students I interacted with were ethnic Chinese. In addition to these on-site interactions, I invited eighteen male (fifteen Chinese, two Malay, one Indian) and seventeen female students (fifteen Chinese, two Malay) for in-depth interviews in a mixture of individual and group settings. These typically took around ninety minutes each and are conducted either within the campus or at public cafes as determined by the informants. The interviews were semi-structured around the pre-identified topics of schooling history; reasons to pursue degree education; personal goals in life; and perceptions of Singapore’s education system.

Most students whom I encountered were young men and women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. They broadly defined themselves as people with middle-income family backgrounds. Given that the total tuition fee for a standard three-year program is around S\$30,000, it is reasonable to assume that young people in their early twenties from the low-income families in Singapore, and who have yet to engage with paid work, will find degree education in private institutes unaffordable. Almost all these students were studying for their first degree through the institute's "global" education arm, where overseas programs from partner universities in Australia, North America, and the UK are being administered. Given that many students at SPI also chose their programs based on the reputation of overseas university that is awarding the degree, the value "western credentials" remains highly coveted by these young people. The dominant ordering of value that codes higher education in Singapore privileges, first and foremost, prestigious overseas universities in the global North, followed by a more "localised" competition amongst the public universities (Ye and Nylander 2015), and finally the local private institutes that occupy the lower tiers of the hierarchy.

Throughout my conversations with students at SPI, young men and women frequently dis-identified themselves with the so-called "educational elites". Students referred to these elites either as those students who study in local public universities or the ones who have gone overseas. However, it was the public university students that has been discursively entwined into the manner private degree students construct narratives and ideas about value and worth. The overseas "educational elites", according to them, are considered as belonging to an entirely separate field of value struggle and competition. As a student once remarked, "those who have money or are smart enough to get scholarship for overseas studies are in another league". The students in my study also shared in the belief that a "good" education does not equate to a "successful" career, and likewise, a "less" educated

person can potentially carve out a distinguished career. They remain committed to this philosophy even as they sometimes saw themselves as having “slipped” or “failed” at some point in their educational journeys. But most strikingly, these young people developed a shared sense of marginality and injustice about the denigration of private degree education. As Woronov (2011) argued, this shared sense of constraints and opportunities serves as a basis for the constitution of a distinct class culture.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, private degree students can be said to inhabit a particular set of material relations that subject them to both middle-class aspirational norms as well as experiences of condescension, misrecognition, and precarity typically associated with non-elite people.

### **Value-coding the “employable” subject**

Students at SPI framed their experiences of studying for a degree as a struggle for credentials marked by unequal symbolic value as compared to those awarded by local public universities. In order to compete for their desired jobs in the graduate labour market, young men and women drew on different resources to code themselves as “employable” workers whose value is reflected from within the body rather than in educational qualifications. As one student commented, “To compete with graduates from the local universities who are in the same field, we need to prove to them [employers] that although we don’t have the nice degrees, what we have is our attitude and also that the things we learn are based on industry relevance and not just following the textbooks.” It is not unusual to hear students speak of the need to “up their ante”, “build up their CV”, or “value-add to their degree” to prepare themselves to become viable human capital in the current labour market, which has been described by Hoffman (2006, 551) as the “new world of ‘demand-meet-supply’ exchanges and ‘mutual choice’”. By recuperating the body as the prime bearer of value, students were shifting the emphasis on accruing cultural capital from its institutionalised to the embodied form (see Bourdieu, 1986). Instead of relying on their

degree credentials as the ticket to secure acceptable jobs and salaries, SPI students expressed a remarkable keenness to strengthen their so-called human potential as expressed in individual dispositions, competencies, and attitudes towards work. Such sentiments are reflected in the narratives of Jinny and Keith:

What we lose out in qualification, we need to make it up in quality. What employers are looking out for is your potential to contribute to the company, not so much of the certificates and qualifications. As long as you can show them you have what it takes, they have no reason to reject you. (Jinny, twenty-three, female)

I know of some seniors who can get jobs in high-profile banks, you know, and people have gone on to achieve big things in their lives. This proves that as long as we're willing to do our best, show what we're good at, and stop the mentality we're inferior, then it is possible for us too. When you go interview, employers want to see you as a person, not you on the paper. (Keith, twenty-three, male)

Both students elaborated in the rest of their interviews about what they thought employers would like to see in job candidates, which included enthusiasm towards the job, willingness to learn, and adaptability to work environment. As a marketing student, Keith also underlined the importance of creativity in designing strategies that would help sell a certain product. He argued that “creativity is something very unique to the individual and cannot be learned from the textbooks”. Jinny, who had worked for three years before continuing for a first degree in human resource management, pointed to relevant work experience as a defining value of herself as a potential employee. Like Jinny and Keith, many students at SPI have developed a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu 1996) by directing their energies and attention to work on their own quality as future workers. What these students were doing reflects the argument by Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) that individuals are now required to invest in personalised forms of capital that would differentiate themselves apart from others. As a result, young people who are invested in formal education have to cope with intensified pressures not only in the form of competition for credentials, but also to search for ways to fashion themselves into the “right” workers for the “right” jobs. Within

SPI, I observed that students have begun to configure certain extra-curricular activities into spaces for cultivating embodied, personalised capital.

A significant number of SPI students whom I encountered and interviewed were studying for degrees related to the subjects of business, economics and finance. Many of them were members of the Student Investment & Networking Club (SINC), a popular and active student club for hold weekly meetings, provide a space for students to promote financial literacy, discuss latest news on investment and finance, and arrange for guest speakers to share insights into the career world of the industry. Student members with varying degrees of involvement in the SINC have all described the club as a space to network with like-minded people and industry experts, as well as to cultivate within themselves dispositions and conducts that are aligned to and deemed appropriate for their future career. Steve (twenty-three, male), for instance, said that SINC provided him with a platform to become better prepared for a professional career as a financial analyst. He explained,

Keeping up to date with information, hearing from people who are already in the industry, all these matters when it comes to knowing what our future employers are looking for. Also, you gain confidence in knowing what to say and how to react at job interviews, so they know you are prepared and not just half-hearted about the job.

Steve's narrative point to the role of the SINC in cultivating what Colley et al. (2003, 488) term the "vocational habitus", which informs "how one should properly feel, look and act, as well as the values, attitudes and beliefs that one should espouse" for a particular job. The way that students undergo a process of professionalisation through the club is widely echoed by other members whom I have interacted with. For them, joining the club has become a ritual for those who aspire towards careers that are related to banking, finance, and investment. While it may be argued that a purposive extra-curricular activity such as the SINC lends itself to be interpreted more instrumentally through the discourse of

“employability”, I have also found young men and women in recreational and sports related student societies to associate their participation with the accrual of personal capitals. These students emphasised the importance of demonstrating to future employers personal strengths, personalities, and characters, which can be amplified through a record of their involvement in non-academic and non-career related activities. As a student commented, “with so many people getting the same degrees, you need to show people your own special interests and strengths that makes you unique”. I have spoken to students who were members of the dance group, canoeing club, and service-learning society who all pointed to the ways their participation can be used to convey “valuable” embodied qualities, such as determination, discipline, and social awareness, which could be packaged into narratives of “good” work ethics of an employable subject. These point to the strategic importance of extra-curricular activities for young people’s transitions into the labour market (Brooks 2007; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller 2013).

Even as students at SPI were coding extra-curricular activities to add value to themselves, these self-activated efforts were laden with complex emotional negotiations. Various students have told me that the constant need to be resourceful in seeking out opportunities and making calculated decisions has become somewhat of a burden to them. Shao (twenty-one, male), who had just started his second year in the finance and economics degree program, is a prime example. When we met in late 2013, Shao was already involved in multiple extra-curricular activities, secured two internships, and represented SPI on several inter-varsity events. He framed these as “ammunition to place [himself] in the best position possible” when entering the graduate labour market. However, Shao also admitted “it is a tiring thing to do, having to always keep a lookout for chances to shine”. When I asked him where he found the motivation and energy to keep up with such strategic accumulation, he replied, “We are still young and have the energy to strive it out. It’s knowing how much to

push yourself and to give yourself a healthy dose of competition.” Shao’s response revealed something poignant about young people’s practices of coding the self as valuable subjects: social reproduction has become ever more dependent on a measure of youthful optimism and resilience.

In some cases, students expressed confusion and frustration with the idea of having to fashion the self into a competitive and marketable subject:

Author: Many students told me they try to build up their CV, you know, trying to make themselves more competitive in the job market. Do you?

Clara: To be honest, I never thought about that. Maybe I should, but I don’t really know. Maybe it’s because I don’t know which direction to go yet. I just want to enjoy my time as a student for now, and not be obsessed with doing this and that to make sure I get a competitive edge. I think it’s good to prepare yourself early, but also I feel that it makes our education become, how to say, mechanical? Like it’s as if our purpose here is just to prepare ourselves to go out and work.

As revealed in Clara’s (twenty-one, female) narrative, the project of adding value to the self is premised upon a future-oriented subject who is able to solve the “technical puzzle” (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011, 143) of enhancing individual employability. But not all students at SPI inhabit this sort of temporal subjectivity, especially for first year students as well as those who have yet to envision a career path for themselves. Clara was particularly critical about how a relentless search for embodied cultural capital to become “employable” can be an obsessive pursuit, and which encourages a narrow, mechanical view of education as preparing students for the labour market. Nevertheless, this degree of reflexivity about the role of higher education was largely absent from the bulk of students I have interacted with at SPI. Many of them believed that a “good” education involves some form of learning and training to secure a desired job.

### **Value-coding the “bookworm” and the “skiver”**

Young people at SPI imagined public universities as places where intellectual elite subjects are produced, whereas private educational institutes are more focused on cultivating students of practical relevance. Such a view is not only informed by SPI’s marketing rituals and technologies – career talks, advertising materials, and pedagogical messages designed into the campus environment – aimed at creating SPI as a space for preparing young people to realise their career aspirations. It is also framed within the idea that public universities are the society’s bastion of intellectual activities, where their historically elevated status as producers of knowledge and innovation dovetails neatly with the image of value creation in the so-called new knowledge economy. Private higher education, in contrast, was never integrated into this image of value, even though this educational market burgeoned under the Singaporean state’s neoliberal agenda. In setting up this imagined chasm between the “intellect” and the “practical”, students maintained private degree education as a distinctive social field with its own set of autonomous, valuable pedagogical approach:

It’s like asking us to compare apples and oranges. They’re just different. Private education to me promotes a different kind of learning in Singapore. Maybe more like making sure we are learning things that are practical and more specialised to our own career. (Amanda, twenty-one, female)

Down here the school is good at career preparation. We are not research universities like the public universities. You can see in the things we do, like our assignments. We don’t write a lot of theoretical essays. Most of them are projects, case studies, all these. It helps us gain knowledge that’s useful when we enter the working world (Keith, twenty-three, male)

The narratives of Amanda and Keith demonstrate how students at SPI value-code private higher education vis-à-vis public university education in a manner that cannot be reduced to a zero-sum game. Young people do acknowledge the existence of a hierarchy within the higher education landscape in Singapore, which ascribe an unequal ordering of value to cultural capital emerging across different institutions. However, this does not automatically

mean that the students internalise this assignment of value. Without discrediting the value of public university education, students at SPI were simultaneously making sense of their education as “good” and equally “useful” in their own ways, especially for boosting the practical competency of students to navigate their future career and working world. But there were also instances when students attempt to challenge the hierarchy by claiming that SPI was “better” at certain aspects of their educational approach. May (twenty-three, female), for example, felt that her marketing degree programme’s emphasis on “real world” implications rather than textbook theories was a superior form of education, specifically in the prevailing graduate labour market. She articulated this sentiment through the quality of students being educated at the two different kinds of educational institutions:

I don’t think we are inferior to local university students. They may have proved that they are very good with scoring in exams, but we are also good in other things. Like in SPI, our lecturers are not like professors in local universities who never worked in the real world before; they have industry experience and knowledge. So we actually get to learn from their experience and not just textbook theories. Of course I’m not saying all lecturers do this, there is this difference there, which I think is very useful to prepare us for the current job market. Actually it’s better that students learn about things that are more applicable now that it’s so hard to get a good job.

May’s preference for industry-relevant skills and knowledge not only shows that education’s value is produced through young people’s reflexivity about shifting economic circumstances. It also points to the way in which positive meanings can be recuperated to create a separate sense of where the value of education lies within. Apart from May, many other SPI students claimed that they prefer “practical lessons” to theory-laden lectures and classes. They identified themselves as “not the intellectual type”, the “hands-on” rather than “exam-smart” students. A memorable young man called Elson (twenty-four) was especially proud of his ability to excel in his part-time job even though he was not educated in elite institutions. He spoke about his achievements working as a real estate agent, his experience in dealing with people from different walks of life, and emphasised the importance of

“learning from the world” rather than “burying heads into books”. Elson also mischievously remarked that students at public universities are typically intellectual but lack real world competencies: “Of course they are clever, good at studying, but that’s because they are bookworms, always in the library”.

The “bookworm” emerged in Elson’s narrative as a metaphorical figure that codes a different kind of value relationship between public university and private degree students. It does not simply attempt to “equalise” the educational value between both groups of educated young people or to carve out some ways in which private degree education can be “better” or more “useful”. Rather, the idea of the bookworm explicitly subverts the dominant subject of value (i.e. the public university student) through disavowing the value regime that legitimises education as an intellectual pursuit. This is reflected in the attitudes of several other students:

I heard from a friend his new understudy from this public university, always screwed up at work. A good example of got the system that focus too much on the brains but not on common sense. (Gan, twenty-three, male)

At my previous workplace, the kids learning centre, this new girl had a psychology degree from local university. You expect her to be very efficient and quick to learn on the job, but I ended up covering most of her work, and she’s supposed to be in charge of them. This gives me the impression that their education never prepared them well; they don’t have the skills to take on the job. (Amanda, twenty-one, female)

Both Gan and Amanda cited “real life” cases at the workplace to exemplify the “failure” of public university’s education, as reflected in the students’ lacklustre performances. In mobilising these “ugly” stories about the so-called bookworms, these students created a narrative about misplaced value on public university graduates and their educational system. They also invoked anti-elitist feelings of resentment and irritation towards how their own worth based on practical abilities has been misrecognised and wrongfully judged – a critical

awareness of the structurally unequal value regime to which they have been subjected (see Ngai 2005).

Students' emphasis on self-activated practices of human capital enhancement also created a new hierarchy of valued subjects within the campus, one that was based on neoliberal ideas around work ethic. Throughout my conversations with students, a figure of the "skiver" emerged to code those students who were "unmotivated", "lazy", and only interested in "getting by" with minimal effort spent on self-cultivation. Young men and women at SPI referred to these people as the "slackers" and the "blacksheep" of private higher education. These skivers have been variously described as "the rich kids", "*Ah Sia Kia*" – a Hokkien term also referring to rich kids, but often with a measure of disdain – or simply "those who have the money and just want to buy a degree". In contrast to the self-activated, responsible learner who augments the body with valuable qualities for future employment, the skiver is framed as being lackadaisical, irresponsible for his/her future, and a time and money waster:

If you want to spend the money to do a degree, you better make sure you genuinely learn something instead of just doing the minimal. Some people just want to be getting by, not wanting to put in efforts. They think that in these times, you get a private degree is enough. I think they are too slack and laidback. (Shao, twenty-one, male)

I think these people just don't want to go into work yet, just because they can afford to, and then use studying as an excuse to escape work life. (Jinny, twenty-three, female)

There are bound to be these students who think they don't have to put in hard work, who are just here for a fast-track degree. In fact these are the students that give private education a bad name. When the society sees the blacksheep, they only focus on those few and generalise to all private degree students. That's how stereotypes come about. (Chong, twenty-five, male)

Student narratives about skiving, as seen in the quotes from Shao, Jinny, and Chong, indicate that young people at SPI have absorbed neoliberal discourses around personal

responsibility and work ethic. Importantly, I have never encountered any so-called skivers during the entire period of my fieldwork, at least in the ways that have been described by students. By talking about these “imaginary” skivers, these young people were able to validate their own practices of value-coding in the image of the “employable” worker-subject. In a way, these narratives reinforce their belief in the state-endorsed qualities of flexibility, adaptability, and resilience to be found in the “learning citizen”. However, students also blended these neoliberal constructs into their talk about these people in a way that is both morally defensive and against misrecognition. This is akin to Stewart’s (1996) idea of “just-talk”, whereby people develop a lay understanding of what is just or unjust based on their shared experiences of certain, often oppressive, material conditions. This is most apparent in Chong’s view that the “students who think they don’t have to put in hard work” are the “blacksheep” of private education. For him, skivers contribute to the stereotypical coding of private degree students as inept and unmotivated, therefore compounding an already “rusty reputation” (Stich 2012, 31) of private higher education in Singapore. In expressing his disapproval, Chong was actually using the value of work ethic to defend against a denigration of reputation rather blindly reproducing dominant state pedagogies.

Young men and women were also producing a moral discourse around the “proper” use of money on education. They claimed that rich kids typically take up a degree program because they have the money, or use education as a means of escaping work life. The term *Ah Sia Kia*, used by some students to label wealthy skivers, expresses their contempt for those who were born with a silver spoon in the mouth. These rich kids can spend their (parents’) money and not take their time in education seriously, “just because they can afford to” (in the words of Jinny). Mundane humiliations and slights are part and parcel of the daily practices that reproduce distinctions around social worth in educational spaces

(Reay 2005). Students at SPI who talked contemptuously about skivers understood their own concerted efforts aimed at maximising cultural profits and adding value to the self as morally superior. This is because this pattern of educational consumption reflects frugality and prudence as compared to the morally inferior spendthrift behavior. Students were coding their profit-accruing subjectivity in a way that seeks to preserve a measure of worth in the person. This is counterintuitive to the view that neoliberal practices of individual accumulation are straightforwardly directed towards the interests of global capitalism.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the case study of students at SPI, I have shown that private degree students are drawn into an intensified form of educational investment, requiring them to accrue value in the form of embodied, personal capital. By shifting their emphasis to the body as the vital site for coding value, these students spent time and energy to convert different kinds of resources into valued qualities of an “employable” worker. To this end, I have made a two-fold argument about young people’s self-activated practices of social reproduction within a neoliberalising context. First, I have demonstrated how they engage with state-promoted values of a “learning citizen”, including that of industry relevance and self-management, to prepare themselves as viable and work-ready individuals, even as these efforts can take a toll on them emotionally. Private degree education may provide a segment of Singaporean youth with fresh opportunities to secure credentials and other cultural capital; but they are also made to work harder to maintain their middle-class aspirations. This situation echoes what Ball (2003, 164) described as a “paradox wherein society becomes structurally more meritocratic but processually less so”. Second, while students at SPI engaged with practices of value coding that were informed by neoliberal discourses, their resourcefulness and profit-maximising dispositions were aimed at preserving a measure of recognition and person worth, rather than serving the interests of the state or that of global capitalism.

Young people often reproduce ideas about personal responsibility and work ethic in a bid to refashion themselves in the current neoliberal imaginary, but they may do so in ways that do not necessarily cohere with state-endorsed visions of neoliberalism.

In this article, I have proposed that the concept of value (trans)coding helps direct analytic energies to the lay motives, norms, and values that give texture to young people's actions in everyday neoliberalising contexts. By attending to the situated and relational ways in which students engage with practices of value coding, I argued that young people reproduce neoliberal discourses in a multidirectional and translational manner. To this end, I have offered a glimpse into new student cultures, practices, and rationalities that may hitherto be eclipsed by taken-for-granted terms such as "market", "privatisation", and "neoliberal subjectivity". Therefore, I propose that the actual production of neoliberal citizenship in education spaces can benefit from a critical analysis of the politics of value (trans)coding. This allows for a clearer view of how students themselves negotiate embodied forms of value, with and against those practices of alienation and exclusion that mark them as human capital. Additionally, my account also points to the usefulness of a culturally-sensitive ethnographic approach for examining the neoliberal politics of social reproduction and human capital formation (see Jeffrey 2010). Ethnography's appeal for fine-grained analyses not only draws attention to the delicate ways in which young people respond to dominant ideas. It also complicates their expressive responses through understanding the manner in which young people invest, problematise, and reinterpret the meanings of their own practices. If higher education is indeed, borrowing Anagnost's (2004, 192) words, a "theater of neoliberal subject production", then I argue that its actors are at least capable of coding their acts with diverse meanings even as the neoliberal script continues to be played out.

## Notes

1. In 2008, the government launched a CET master plan with an endowment fund of S\$5 billion to improve training infrastructure, set up new specialised institutes of learning, and design programs to build stronger linkages between education institutions and “new” growth industries. In 2015, the SkillsFuture programme was introduced to help Singaporeans across all ages to advance industry relevant skills.
2. All figures are obtained from the Ministry of Education University Expansion Report (MOE 2012, 53-54).
3. Woronov (2011) had included into her conceptualisation of cultural class formation an analysis of students’ post-educational lives in the labour market. However, this was not possible within the remit of my study.

## References

- Abelmann, N., S. J. Park, and H. Kim. 2009. College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10 (2):229-247.
- Allen, K., and S. Hollingworth. 2013. “Sticky subjects” or “cosmopolitan creatives”? Social class, place and urban young people’s aspirations for work in the knowledge economy. *Urban Studies* 50 (3):499–517.
- Allen, K., J. Quinn, S. Hollingworth, and A. Rose. 2013. Becoming employable students and “ideal” creative workers: exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (3):431–452.
- Anagnost, A. 2004. The corporeal politics of quality (suzhi). *Public Culture* 16 (2):189–208.
- Ball, S. J. 2003. The risks of social reproduction : the middle class and education markets. *London Review of Education* 1 (3):63–175.
- Barnett, C., N. Clarke, P. Cloke, and A. Malpass. 2008. The elusive subjects of neo-liberalism. *Cultural Studies* 22 (5):624–653.
- Bathmaker, A. M., N. Ingram, and R. Waller. 2013. Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (5-6):723–743.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. Forms of capital. In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richards, 241-258. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1996. *The State Nobility*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brooks, R. 2007. Young people’s extra-curricular activities: critical social engagement – or ‘something for the CV’? *Journal of Social Policy* 36 (3):417-434.

- Brown, P., H. Lauder, and D. Ashton. 2011. *The Global Auction: the Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Castree, N. 2006. From neoliberalism to neoliberalisation: consolations, confusions, and necessary illusions. *Environment and Planning A* 38 (1):1–6.
- Cheng, Y. 2015. Biopolitical geographies of student life: private higher education and citizenship life-making in Singapore. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (5): 1078-1093.
- Colley, H., D. James, K. Diment, and M. Tedder. 2003. Learning as becoming in vocational education and training: class, gender and the role of vocational habitus. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 55 (4):471–498.
- Collins, F. L., R. Sidhu, N. Lewis, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2014. Mobility and desire: international students and Asian regionalism in aspirational Singapore. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35 (5):661–676.
- Davidson, E. 2008. Marketing the self: the politics of aspiration among middle-class Silicon Valley youth. *Environment and Planning A* 40 (12):2814–2830.
- Davies, B., and P. Bansel. 2007. Neoliberalism and education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20 (3):247–259.
- Freeman, C. 2011. Neoliberalism: embodying and affecting neoliberalism. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, ed. F. E. Mascia-Lees, 353–369. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gagen, E. A. 2013. Governing emotions: citizenship, neuroscience and the education of youth. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40 (1):140–152.
- Gerrard, J. 2014. All that is solid melts into work: self-work, the “learning ethic” and the work ethic. *The Sociological Review* 62 (4):862–879.
- Giroux, H. 2003. Youth, higher education, and the crisis of public time: educated hope and the possibility of a democratic future. *Social Identities* 9 (2):141–168.
- Gopinathan, S. 2007. Globalisation, the Singapore developmental state and education policy: a thesis revisited. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 5 (1):53–70.
- Hansen, A. S. 2012. Learning the knacks of actually existing capitalism : young Beijing migrants and the problem of value. *Critique of Anthropology* 32 (4):415–434.
- Hoffman, L. 2006. Autonomous choices and patriotic professionalism: on governmentality in late-socialist China. *Economy and Society* 35 (4):550–570.
- Jeffrey, C. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

- Jeffrey, C., and L. McDowell. 2004. Youth in a comparative perspective: global change, local lives. *Youth & Society* 36 (2):131–142.
- Katz, C. 2008. Childhood as spectacle : relays of anxiety and the reconfiguration of the child. *Cultural Geographies* 15 (1):5–17.
- Kipnis, A. B. 2011. Subjectification and education for quality in China. *Economy and Society* 40 (2):289–306.
- . 2007. Neoliberalism reified: suzhi discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People’ s Republic of China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2):383–400.
- Kraftl, P. 2015. Alter-childhoods: biopolitics and childhoods in alternative education spaces. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (1):219–237.
- Larner, W. 2000: Neo-liberalism: policy, ideology, governmentality. *Studies in Political Economy* 63:5–25.
- Laurie, N. 2012. Towards a comparative ethnography in geography? *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102 (2):500–502.
- Lee, H. L. 2008. Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (e2i), 1 Feb 2008, 10am, at the Employment and Employability Institute, Singapore. Available: [http://www.wda.gov.sg/content/wdaweb/L209-001About-Us/L218-SpeechListing/01\\_Feb\\_2008.html](http://www.wda.gov.sg/content/wdaweb/L209-001About-Us/L218-SpeechListing/01_Feb_2008.html) [Accessed on 10 September 2015]
- Lee, R. 2006. The ordinary economy: tangled up in values and geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (4):413–432.
- Liu, F. 2008. Constructing the autonomous middle-class self in today’s China: the case of young-adult only-children university students. *Journal of Youth Studies* 11 (2):193–212.
- Lynch, K., M. Lyons, and S. Cantillon. 2007. Breaking silence: educating citizens for love, care and solidarity. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 17 (1-2):1–19.
- Mitchell, K. 2006. Neoliberal governmentality in the European Union: education, training, and technologies of citizenship. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (3):389–407.
- MOE (Ministry of Education). 2012. *Report on the Committee on University Education Pathways Beyond 2015 (CUEP): Final Report*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- Ngai, S. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Olsen, M., and M. A. Peters. 2005. Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy* 20 (3):313–345.

- Ong, A. 2007. Neoliberalism as a mobile technology. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (1):3–8.
- Peters, M. A. 2009. Education, creativity and the economy of passions: new forms of educational capitalism. *Thesis Eleven* 96 (1):40–63.
- Pykett, J. 2010. Introduction: the pedagogical state: education, citizenship, governing. *Citizenship Studies* 14 (6):617–619.
- Reay, D. 2005. Beyond consciousness?: the psychic landscape of social class. *Sociology* 39 (5):911–928.
- Ruddick, S. 2003. The politics of aging: globalization and the restructuring of youth and childhood. *Antipode* 35 (2):334–362.
- Sidhu, R., K. C. Ho, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2011. Emerging education hubs: the case of Singapore. *Higher Education* 61 (1):23–40.
- Skeggs, B. 2014. Values beyond value? Is anything beyond the logic of capital? *The British journal of sociology* 65 (1):1–20.
- . 2011. Imagining personhood differently: person value and autonomist working-class value practices. *Sociological Review* 59 (3):496–513.
- Stewart, K. 1996. *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an 'Other' America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stich, A. 2012. *Access to Inequality: Reconsidering Class, Knowledge, and Capital in Higher Education*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.
- Tan, K. P. 2012. The ideology of pragmatism: neo-liberal globalisation and political authoritarianism in Singapore. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42 (1):67–92.
- Urciuoli, B. 2010. Skills and selves in the new workplace. *American Ethnologist* 35 (2):211–228.
- Waring, P. 2013. Singapore's global schoolhouse strategy: retreat or recalibration? *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (5):874–884.
- Woronov, T. E. 2011. Learning to serve: urban youth, vocational schools and new class formations in China. *The China Journal* 66:77–99.
- Yang, P. 2014. "Authenticity" and "foreign talent" in Singapore: the relative and negative logic of national identity, *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 29 (2):408–437.
- Ye, R., and E. Nylander. 2015. The transnational track: state sponsorship and Singapore's Oxbridge elite. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (1):11–33.

## **Critical Geographies of Education Beyond “Value”: Moral Sentiments, Caring, and a Politics for Acting Differently**

### **Abstract**

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Singapore between 2013 and 2014, this article discusses the ways in which students mobilise different moral and ethical values to perform informal care at a private educational institute. The task is to advance a critical approach that restores to geographical analyses of education a sense in which students can “act differently” from the dominant image of a neoliberal calculative and individualistic competitor in the social field of education. Focusing on the implicit normativity in everyday student life, the themes of deconstructive empathy, friendship solidarities, and intergenerational love will be discussed. The article makes two contributions to existing scholarship around higher educational geographies. It points to the presence of an ethos of relational care, rather than its corrosion, in the contemporary “neoliberal” campus. It also adds empirical flesh to ongoing efforts in exploring “alternative” experiences of neoliberalising education through care, love, and intimacy. *Key Words: higher education, values, normativity, care, neoliberalism, Singapore*

### **Introduction**

Young people, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, are often intensifying their search for cultural capital in the forms of university degrees (Waters and Leung 2014), extra-curricular activities and internships (Liu 2008; Bathmaker et al 2013), linguistic skills (Park and Abelmann 2004), and “overseas experience” (Waters 2011; Yoon 2014). Studies on the neoliberal governance of higher education student life have pointed to the ways students are fashioning their identities through images of the enterprising and individualistic self in order to become “successful” worker-consumer citizens (Davidson 2008; Liu 2008; Burke 2011; Allen et al. 2013). It is now widely argued that neoliberal ideas of, for instance, flexibility, self-enterprise, personal responsibility, adaptability, freedom and so forth, have penetrated the realms of education and learning. Under these pervading discourses, young people are not only incited constantly to “seek introspection, self-mastery, and personal fulfillment” in the marketplace, but are also required to embrace the view that “capital accumulation is not an end in itself, but a means of reinvention” (Freeman 2011, 356).

Even as the literature at large has evinced the complex circumstances under which young people's material practices may replenish the bases of capitalism, there is a tendency for them to over-emphasise the strategic and calculative aspects of social actions (see Waters, Brooks and Pimlott-Wilson 2011 for a more "balanced" approach). Scholars such as Sayer (2003) and Skeggs (2004) have argued that many of these (post-)Marxist inspired analyses, from Bourdieu's habitus and cultural capital to theories of governmentality, tended to formulate the process of self-making and self-invention as premised upon the accumulation of value via various resources and techniques. Culture, in terms of activities, objects, and dispositions are assumed to be able to confer value upon the self, and which can serve as exchange-value at some point in time. As a result, young people's narratives and practices around education are often interpreted as competitive struggles for status and recognition within a pervasive neoliberal imaginary. Consequently, the subtle ways in which young people in education are able to perform multiple and more complex student subjectivities are often glossed over.

In this article, I propose a critical approach that restores to geographical analyses of education a sense in which students can "act differently" from the dominant image of a calculative and strategic competitor in the social field of education, even as educational success and accomplishment remain important among young people. I do this through a critical geographical standpoint that acknowledges the role of normativity as a certain style of critique (see Olson and Sayer 2009). Normativity in this case, or what Sayer (2005) calls lay normativity, is defined as "an ordinary feature of ongoing flow of life" where ethics and morality are part and parcel of how people rationalise and reason (Barnett 2013, 152). This is opposed to the prescriptive version that sought to exhort universalistic conduct and behavior. Drawing on this understanding, I explore the different ways students themselves evaluate what is right or wrong and good or bad, the ways they act upon these beliefs, and

how they reason based on moral sentiments. In doing so, I point to how students generate spatial practices that are counterintuitive to the neoliberal rhetoric of strategic calculation and competitive individualism.

Based on research conducted in Singapore on higher education and youth citizenship at a private educational institute, this article focuses on those instances where care is “offered as a gift beyond exchange relations” (Skeggs 2014, 13). I illustrate how students draw upon implicit values that lie beyond the logic of capital – what Skeggs (2014) call “values beyond value” – to guide their actions of care and affection towards the self and others. The article begins by forwarding a particular way of understanding emotions to explore the normative dimension of care. I then describe the ethnographic context in which research was carried out. This is followed by a discussion of three key themes to examine the emergence of caring practices from everyday forms of moral and ethical reasoning. I also show how these practices constitute, within their immediate contexts and situations, a politics of acting differently that does not assume neoliberalism is “centre” around which practices are defined against. The concluding section reflects on how thinking about implicit normativity, moral sentiments, and ethical care in education spaces can advance critical geographies of education.

### **Locating normativity: moral sentiments and care**

Wider discussions in human geography on social practices and its normative (ethical) dimension have reminded us that people’s actions in the world cannot be reduced to products of power and discourses (Barnett 2012; 2013). In a bid to give critical attention to the nature of practices, space, and power, geographers have introduced the relevance of pragmatism as a theory of practice to inspire new ways of thinking within the discipline (Ernste 2004; Wood and Smith 2008). Pragmatist approaches have become increasingly

registered in geographical writings on urban life (Bridge 2008), environment (Hobson 2006), consumption (Sayer 2003; Barnett et al 2005), as well as that of children's geographies around utopian hope (Kraftl 2009) and political agency (Häkli and Kallio 2013). Although pragmatism is often criticised for its tendency to be "ahistorical", it has also been defended as a methodological toolkit that can be deployed alongside other philosophical approaches (Koopman 2010; 2011). More importantly for this article, there is an appeal in a pragmatist theory of practice, which maintains that people's actions are guided by an ongoing process of reasoning rooted in everyday forms of rationality (Rorty 1996; Rouse 2007). It therefore acknowledges people's constructions of rationalities are mediated by a world of communication and normative concerns, rather than guided by covert interests and ideologies driven by logic of capitalism.

There is now also a vibrant scholarship on student geographies in higher education that examines young people's negotiation of transitions, mobilities, and identity politics within broader power structures (Holton and Riley 2013). Yet very few of these studies pay attention to everyday moral commitments and ethical beliefs from the perspectives of students themselves (e.g. Holdsworth and Quinn 2012). One way of locating these forms of normativity is by looking for a range of values that emerge from the ordinary articulations of feelings and sentiments. Moral and ethical reasoning, as Barnett (2012, 382) argues, is a feature of "embodied, situated actions" and hence inter-subjective, as well as emotional. Emotional expressions are underpinned by how people negotiate values within the "spaces of practical reasoning" (Barnett 2012, 384). A focus on emotions, viewed in this way, may contribute to a more culturally sensitive political economic analysis of youth practices (see Jeffrey 2008), without assuming the totalising effects of neoliberal discourses often slipped into academic writings about neoliberal governmentality (Sayer 2005; Barnett 2013).

Geographical writings on children and young people have explored different conceptual approaches of emotions: as representational expressions of feelings, as pre-cognitive sensations and affects, and as the combination of feelings, thoughts and actions captured within intersubjective practices (Blazek 2013; Kraftl 2013). While these approaches are useful, I offer another way of theorising emotions that explicitly underlines how implicit normativity is located within and reflected through feelings and practices. To this end, I turn to Andrew Sayer's (2005) work on lay normativity and emotions. At the heart of his conceptualisation is an insistence that people's actions are guided by their own reflections on and sentiments about a range of things that matter to them:

The most important questions and concerns people tend to face in their everyday lives are normative ones of how to act, what to do for the best, what is good or bad about what is happening, including how others are treating them and things which they care about. [...] If we ignore this lay normativity or reduce it to an effect of discourse or socialisation we produce an anodyne and alienated account of subjectivity which renders our evident concern about what we do and what happens to us incomprehensible (Sayer 2005, 949-950).

This particular way of understanding the implicit normativity of everyday life is underpinned by a theory of the habitus as fundamentally infused with multiple ethical beliefs about what constitute human flourishing and suffering (Sayer 2005). This view eschews the Bourdieuan analysis often found in educational research that takes the habitus as constituted through relatively stable sets of social relations, which makes it difficult to imagine a contemporary "self" outside the construct of a "possessive individual" (Skeggs 2004). It should be noted that Bourdieu (1977) does acknowledge that people can critically reflect on their habitus and that new practices to be generated, even though this has often

been downplayed in many geographical writings. Building on Bourdieu's theory, Lahire (2011) argues that the habitus as constituted through plural schemes of action that are produced in the ongoing spaces of everyday life enables a view that bodies can do other things apart from accumulating and possessing. The relationship between normativity and emotions is articulated in the idea that people are capable of evaluating everyday norms, form commitments to things they care about, and make judgements about matters that influence human well-being.

Taken this way, values are constructed in ordinary structured practices of judgement and reflection, which are then expressed by feelings and sentiments otherwise termed as "moral sentiments". This approach refuses to treat the role of emotions as either "mere subjective" effects or as "affective technologies" (Thrift 2004). It is also different from the disembodied and depoliticised notion of "affect", which tend to theorise feelings and sentiments as devoid of rational content (c.f. McCormack 2003; Anderson 2006). Far from being "irrational", emotions "are often perceptive and reasonable judgements about situations and processes" (Sayer 2005, 951). While this understanding of emotions overlap with existing accounts of emotion/affect in various ways, it establishes a more explicit link between morality and emotions in a manner yet to be clarified in extant geographical scholarship on young people and education (e.g. Horton and Kraftl 2009).

The notion of moral sentiments provides a useful entry point for exploring how caring practices and relations are guided by practical negotiations of multiple values, especially those that do not emerge from state-led neoliberal regimes. It is not the article's intention to argue that there are "pure" and free-floating values that exist outside capitalist regimes. Rather, I agree with Chakrabarty (2000) that ruptures and discontinuities to the hegemony of capitalist value cannot be taken as non-capitalist. Therefore, I acknowledge that caring

relationships and practices, whether it is “caring for” or “caring about”, are caught in contemporary dynamics that promote and reproduce global capitalism. These forms of care have been widely documented and critiqued, such as state withdrawal from welfare provision, privatisation of care, and commodification of reproductive labour (Staeheli and Brown 2003; McDowell 2004; Milligan and Wiles 2010). Nonetheless, caring can also be “a different way of being in the world, relating to others as if they matter, with attentiveness and compassion, beyond exchange” (Skeggs 2014, 13). This understanding bears semblance to a feminist ethics of care, and to the idea that practice expresses the mutual accountability within people’s social interactions (Rouse 2007), or simply that people can be “sensitive to what makes other people feel comfortable” (Miller 2010, 420).

This view of care is also a political one, especially when understood through a pragmatist reading of power as “something that makes things happen: it is what enables us to *make a difference* in the world” (Allen 2008, 1614). Wood and Smith (2008, 1527) also write that the politics of pragmatist approaches entail “a desire to make the world – bit by bit, unevenly, by accident as well as by design – into a better place”. Under this notion of power, political agency is evoked when the knowledges, habits, and routines tied to everyday concerns of people are interrupted or challenged. This implies that “the meanings of the political may not be known in advance and thus need to be worked out empirically” in their emergent contexts (Häkli and Kallio 2013, 195). To this end, it is instructive to note that for care to constitute a political act, there will be a sense of purpose attached to it, whether it is to address issues of recognition and representation or simply to preserve a measure of answerability in a given spatial and temporal context. The act of caring as a relational practice to uphold mutual accountability, therefore, can be understood as political even if it is modest and provisional.

## **Research context**

Over the last two decades, local tertiary institutions such as polytechnics and universities in Singapore underwent reforms that focus on building new networks, alliances and physical infrastructure, which are part of the Singaporean government's aim to transform the globalising city-state into an education hub (Collins et al. 2014; Sidhu, Ho and Yeoh 2011). In addition to transforming local public universities into global centres of research and innovation excellence, the government also encouraged the privatisation of higher education by attracting new players into the (educational) market (Waring 2013). In this way, private higher education constitutes an educational regime that is well incorporated into the neoliberal agenda of the Singaporean state to globalise its higher education sector. In the Singaporean state's latest round of economic development, a university expansion plan was initiated in 2012 to consider strategies for catering to Singaporeans' growing demand for degree education, especially among the middle-class faction of the society, while ensuring that the future expanded cohort of graduate workforce would possess the credentials and skills required by the demand of the labour market. According to the Committee report on this university expansion project, private institutes "play a role in complementing the public university sector, by injecting greater course diversity and supporting workforce development" (MOE 2012, 9). Under the 2012 expansion plan, the government recommended new subsidised full-time degree programs with a core focus on industry-relevant curriculum to be implemented at Singapore Private Institute (SPI).

The research informing this article is based on fieldwork conducted in SPI over a period of eleven months between 2013 and 2014. The institute, which offers both part-time and full-time degree programs, is the largest private education provider in Singapore offering a mixture of locally awarded degrees as well as transnational degree programs in partnership with universities from the UK, Australia, and North America. It has an estimated enrolment

of about 30,000 Singaporeans (Davie 2011), out of about 47,500 locals who have enrolled in undergraduate degree programs across all private institutes (MOE 2012). Most of the students whom I encountered during fieldwork were young men and women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. They were pursuing their first undergraduate degree in a variety of programs ranging from social sciences to business and finance, with the latter being the most common specialisation. This is because most of the degree programs offered in this institute, and to a large extent across all private degree institutions, concentrate mainly in the field of business, finance, and marketing. Almost all of the students in my research pursued private degree education because they were unable to gain entry into their preferred local public universities. This is because the existing ordering of higher educational capital in Singapore continues to privilege prestigious overseas universities in the global North, followed by a more “localised” competition amongst the public universities (Ye and Nylander 2015), and with private institutions occupying the lower tiers of the hierarchy.

Much of the fieldwork involved multiple visits to the campus during the course of research and spoke to students opportunistically. On a typical visit, I spent around three hours walking around the campus and approaching students to start a conversation. Most of my conversations with SPI students took place in a variety of sites within the campus: along corridor benches, student lounges, and cafeterias; places where they were often seen hanging out together in their own friendship circles. Students in these small social settings were engaged in different kinds of activities, including project work discussions and preparation for tutorial assignments as well as more leisure acts of chatting and waiting for time to pass in between classes. Apart from spending time with students on campus, I also observed routines in the campus, as well as collected information about the institute through online and on-site brochures and magazines.

In addition to these on-site interactions with students, I invited eighteen male (fifteen Chinese, two Malay, one Indian) and seventeen female students (fifteen Chinese, two Malay) for in-depth interviews in a mixture of individual and group settings. These typically took around ninety minutes each and were conducted either within the campus or at public cafes as determined by the informants. The interviews were semi-structured around the pre-identified topics of schooling history; reasons to pursue degree education; personal goals in life; and perceptions of Singapore's education system. By reflecting on how students express moral sentiments pertaining to a range of issues emerging from our talk, I was able to explore the kinds of values and commitments that animate "moments of connection, of enchantment, of affective force" (Skeggs 2014, 19) that propel students to act towards each other in caring ways.

### **Three accounts of implicit normativity and practices of care**

In this section, I explore the ways in which students at SPI draw upon various moral and ethical values, with an emphasis on those that lie beyond the blinker of capital's value, as the basis for caring practices. While students make sense of and practise care in their own distinct ways across the three accounts, all of them reveal how practices of care constitute subtle acts of doing things differently and attempts to make a difference to the world they live in. The following discussion focuses on empathy, solidarities, and love to illuminate the complex forms of care that emerge out of specific situations, and how students mobilise them to address particular matters of concern.

#### ***Class reflexivity and deconstructive empathy***

Jess, a nineteen-year-old old student at SPI, was in her second year when I first met her at the campus in 2013. Having received six years of secondary and A-level education at the top elite schools in Singapore, Jess had never imagined herself pursuing a degree education

at a private institution. She said during interview, “nobody talked about getting a private degree in my junior college. Not the students, not the teachers”. She explained that during her two years at the junior college, it was “very normal” for students to aim for a scholarship to study overseas or at the local public universities. One of her teachers had even cautioned that these were the only legitimate options that they should consider: “She told us if we cannot get into local universities at the very least, then we should consider re-taking our A levels.” These narratives that circulate within Jess’s school environment illustrate a culture of elitism that seeks to preserve the elite school’s institutional capacity to groom and produce the best students as well as a status of exclusivity and talentedness (Koh 2014). Under such circumstances, Jess had cultivated a habitus informed by a specific middle-class, elitist notion of the “normal” aspiration and legitimate university option for students of her calibre and talent. This is revealed in her own words,

When I first came here (SPI), I don’t feel like I belong because the academic environment is very different. It’s at a slower pace, the people here are less competitive, and not very quick at understanding more difficult theories and concepts. I’m used to a faster pace and competitive environment. Less competitive is good because it’s less stressful. But I also feel like I don’t achieve my full potential.

Just as working-class students feel as though they are “fish out of water” in elite universities (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall 2007; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009), Jess also spoke of difficulties in adjusting her habitus when she first entered SPI. She described herself as a student who had acquired the habit of learning in a speeded-up and competitive educational environment, whereby SPI was understood as a space of dislocation and asynchronicity. She also understood the perceived lack of competitive spirit amongst the students in SPI as double-edged sword that has the potential to reduce undue stress but also risks impeding her realisation of the self as a talented individual. While the narratives of Jess here echo the current neoliberal rhetoric of prudence, competition, and self-maximisation that are shaping

educational practices, she is far from being the individuated and uncaring subject of neoliberal education.

Friendship, and the caring relations that it entails, is a significant component in her everyday experience of the campus. She cited the case of Nora, her classmate, as a source of inspiration and personal growth: “We hang out a lot and she really helped me grow as a person.” Jess’s initial impression of Nora was that “she is not a serious student”, given that Nora spent most of her time working as a part-time café barista and had a hard time catching up with academic work. But Jess found out over time that Nora invested time and energy in the job because she had to help support the family financially. This newfound awareness of her friend’s personal background had evoked in Jess a sense of critical self reflection, where she evaluated her own privileged and classed position as someone who had come from a wealthier family and received an elite education for most part of her schooling life:

I felt quite bad for judging her initially. After knowing her background and everything, I realised how privilege I am, to be able to attend a good school, don’t have to worry about paying tuition fees for education. My parents even asked me to consider studying overseas, which they will pay for me. It’s like I can see the social class difference there, which kind of, how to say, motivated me to want to help her as a friend.

Jess then referred to Christian teachings that stress the importance of empathy and caring about the well being of others as a source of moral inspiration. Empathy was integral to how Jess evaluates her thoughts and actions in relation to what is considered “good” behavior towards her friends: “Instead of judging, I learned to empathise with her situation.” As Elisha (2008, 156) argues, Christian notions of “empathetic, unconditional benevolence” based on an ethical view of common humanity has the potential to elide social differences and recast the act of empathy as an ethical response to care for others.

Caring relations and practices therefore cannot be reduced to a neoliberal logic of personal responsibility and accountability that serves the state's interests.

I once witnessed how Jess acts upon her beliefs by providing Nora with help in her studies in a café nearby the campus. I also learned from Jess later during fieldwork that her regular “tuition” sessions with Nora had inspired them to initiate a study group, which acts as an important platform for their friends to support each other academically. Within the group, Jess would draw on her elite cultural capital of intellectual competence and assuredness (Forbes and Lingard 2013) to provide study tips, and help alleviate the stress that her friends often face in their studies. Even though the moral capacity to empathise rests on a differentiated friendship between the “privileged” and the “less-privileged” (Bowlby 2011), there is also a measure of non-individualised form of care that is being practiced among peers. In this instance, friendship not only becomes a vital site of informal care, but also serves as a medium through which empathy is cultivated as an everyday ethic. Therefore friendship is not merely a vehicle for reproduction of unequal power relations, but also provides “opportunities for imaginative cultural projects and effective cooperation” (Dyson 2010, 495).

It may be argued that Jess's performance of empathy depicted in this case rests on the unequal relationship of class and privilege between Nora and herself, which inevitably underscores the hierarchies and distinctions between subjects (see Pedwell 2012a; 2012b). Nevertheless, this does not, and indeed should not, undermine empathy as one crucial expression of lay morality that connects difference across class through care, as opposed to condescension (c.f. McDowell 2006). Therefore, I follow Holdsworth and Quinn's (2012) distinction between “deconstructive” and “reproductive” forms of volunteering to suggest that the value of empathy espoused by Jess is a form of deconstructive (and therefore,

political) empathy. This is because empathy, in this case, provides Jess with a source of learning about and critiquing unequal power structures, rather than reproducing and reinforcing them.

Jess's case offers but one way of catching a glimpse into the manner in which caring relations and practices in SPI are mediated by friendship, mutual support, and informal learning. Rather than being an isolated case, such ordinary commitments within the campus are thrown into sharper relief when the interpretive lens is turned onto friendship as a site of (hidden) solidarities (Spencer and Pahl 2006).

### *Learning through islands of solidarities*

Many students at SPI whom I have interacted with exhibit a remarkable reflexivity about their own educational circumstances. On the one hand, they view private higher education as an educational market that provides young people like themselves – “those who cannot make it into local or overseas universities” (in the words of a student) – an alternative pathway to obtain degree credentials. On the other hand, they are cognisant, to varying degrees, of the broader educational and class structures that constitute their “failure” to secure a spot in the more privileged universities. The following interview quotes demonstrate this contradiction clearly:

The Singapore education system is such that if you don't perform well, you missed a step, it's very hard to get back on the right track. Our system, they say it's meritocracy, but it privileges those who are good in exams. So private degree for me is a chance to get back on track. (Hafiz, twenty-two, male)

It's like a second chance. But again it's not really, because we were never given the chance to compete on equal grounds. For polytechnic students, the intake is capped at a lower percentage, so we literally need to get very, very good GPA, like at least 3.7 out of 4, in order to get into a local universities. (Amanda, twenty-one, female)

I think private degree is mainly for those who don't have the money to go overseas for university if they cannot get into the local ones. I have friends who didn't do well,

their parents can sponsor them, so they just go overseas to do it. (Nadia, twenty, female)

Students react to their positions in the hierarchy of educational capital with a mixture of a sense of marginalisation, frustration, and optimism. These young men and women were also not naïvely desiring for cultural capital through education. On the contrary, they were capable of critiquing the very structural conditions that encourage their attachment to the normative “good” life, even if there are limitations on the extent to which critical sensibilities can generate substantial transformation (Cheng 2015). More importantly, I observed a striking pattern of caring practices that emerged from this emotional sensibility: students established small-scale supportive networks in their own friendship circles, in the process islands of solidarities emerged in the space of the campus.

Students often enact caring support for each other in and through informal learning, with an emphasis on the value of inter-dependencies. They utilise a range of spaces within SPI, notably corridor benches, canteens, and cafes, to revise academic work and to discuss tutorial assignments. During these activities, students engaged with learning in a manner that uses time to help one another as people “on the same boat”, as captured by the words of May (twenty-three, female):

We are all on the same boat, so we should help one another. For our course (business marketing), the classes are mainly in the format of lectures. Our tutorial classes are usually used to go through answers for assignments, or the teachers will use them to carry on their lectures. So if we don’t understand anything, we usually turn to each other. Sometimes I feel like their main aim in teaching is just to get it over and done with.

For May, informal learning spaces emerged as a crucial site in which a more caring ethos of learning is played out, as compared to the colonisation of time in formal classrooms and lecture theaters by an urgent imperative to complete the syllabus on time. Many other

students shared this juxtaposition of temporal experiences between formal and informal learning spaces. Some have described attending lectures as “monotonous”, “boring”, and “just sitting there and listening”. Others complained about the speed at which lecturers carry out their classes. There were some exceptions whereby students encountered more engaging lecturers and tutors, but such encounters were often seen as “if you are lucky enough” (in the words of a student). In the case of Song (twenty-three, male), a culture of care amongst friends was constructed in a way that works against the temporality of private degree education perceived as a “degree mill”:

I think private degree education is ultimately a degree mill. Maybe some are more so than others. But I don't think you can deny they operate as a business, and they ultimately want to earn money from us. They don't even hire proper lecturers, mostly are just part-time masters degree holders, to teach us. So usually what we get is the lecturer just going through the motion, then we will get very lost. We can only depend on ourselves and friends

Song invoked a popular construct of the “degree mill” to critique the care-less and mechanised aspect of his experience at SPI. Although the notion of degree mill refers to institutions that offer unaccredited qualifications, the reference here is more loosely used to label those profit-seeking, commercialised educational providers.<sup>1</sup> According to him, the institute’s lack of “proper lecturers” (i.e. doctoral degree holders) and use of part-time, less qualified tutors who were more concerned with “going through the motion” of delivering the syllabus, created a situation in which mutual support among friends took on increased importance. This narrative, ironically, parallels Jeffrey and Dyson’s (2008) observation that the significance of friendship for young people may have become more important in the context of neoliberalisation. In Song’s case, solidarity among friends serves to mitigate a sense of loss when care and attention is ostensibly missing from the pedagogical environment.

Perhaps more importantly than learning itself, students were making use of time and space in the campus according to their own temporalities, providing each other with company, accounting for each other along the way, and motivating each other during stressful times of examinations and assignment deadlines. Friendships for these students were constituted as social capital based on an ordering of moral commitments and ethical concerns centered around inter-dependencies, as opposed to a more strategic view of sociality as investment for the future (c.f. Holt 2008). They were also practicing care in a political manner aimed at re-making the socio-material circumstances for the better, albeit in their own subtle ways. All these simple acts of care, as well as the narratives of May and Song, point to how private degree students were giving time and energy to others, rather than maximising the use of time for self-investment and cultivating capital to be converted into future gains. In the words of Skeggs (2011, 509), this is a different kind of value practice from the neoliberal logic of accrual, one that is based on “the gift of attention to others over time”.

### *Self-care and intergenerational love*

Two striking emotional narratives emerged in my interviews with SPI students around how young people invest in higher education as a form of relational self-care. This is an expression of self-care that is entangled in various relationships, mutual accountability, obligations, and responsibilities. The first story centers on Kit (twenty-two, female), a marketing degree student at the institute. My initial encounter with Kit was at a project group meeting that another student had invited me to, where I negotiated for half an hour of their time to “have a chat” about their immediate views of studying at SPI. During the conversation, Kit remained rather quiet while the rest spoke animatedly about the importance of securing a degree to “survive” in Singapore. When I solicited Kit for her thoughts on the topic, she simply said, “I agree with them. But it’s not just about wanting to get a good job and make big money, then we do a degree.” Kit paused for a minute and her

eyes welled up in tears. This moment of emotional rupture placed a punctuation to the conversation, and constituted an affective event (McCormack 2003) whereby a new awareness for “alternative” spaces of reasoning emerged. I followed up on Kit with a personal interview the following week so that I could learn more about the story behind that single, yet profound, moment.

“At first I didn’t want to take up a degree after I graduated from polytechnic. I’m a very simple person, so to me a diploma is already good enough,” Kit explained to me during interview. She continued to share that her decision to study for a degree was actually a moral response to the death of her grandfather, whom she was extremely close to:

Kit: Since young I’m very close to my grandfather. Maybe it’s because of this that I feel like I have to try and fulfill his wish at the deathbed. He really took care of me a lot when I was younger.

Author: What was your grandfather’s wish back then?

Kit: Oh, because he didn’t just pass away suddenly. So at the hospital, all the children, the younger ones in the family, went up to him one by one so he could say his last words to us. He was already very weak at that time. Then since I am the youngest in the family, I was the last to go. Basically he told me to study hard, get a university degree, and don’t let my parents worry about our future. So I feel like if I take good care of myself, get a degree, then I will not, how to say, *gufu tamen* (fail to live up to their expectations).

Author: Did he know you actually didn’t want to study a degree?

Kit: I never mentioned it to him before. But you know for his generation, getting a *daxue wenping* (university degree) is like a huge achievement. It’s like *guangzong yaozu* (bringing honor to the ancestors), you know.

Kit’s story revealed two key elements about intergenerationality in producing notions and practices of care. First, there was a cross-generational transmission of ideas about “achievement” and “success” (i.e. honor and glory) that precipitated a notion of educational investment as self-care. This was underpinned by a moral expectation around a child’s ethical relationship with the parents, where caring of the self is tied to *caring about* the

parents, as manifested in the idea of not letting the parents worry about their children's future. Second, it is Kit's (intergenerational) love for an intimate member of the family, guided by a degree of reciprocity and accountability, which kindled a moral commitment to "take good care of [herself], get a degree", and not "fail' the folks.

The ideas of intergenerational reciprocity and accountability also emerged prominently in Chee's (twenty-four, male) interview narrative. It was a story of a son's love for his mother, and the attendant notion of studying hard as an expression of gratitude for parental upbringing. Chee, a business student at SPI, told me about his aim to graduate with a first class degree. When I asked him for the reason behind this motivation, he replied:

I think for me it's about being responsible for my own actions and my life. In my family it's just me, my brother, and my mum, because my dad passed away. So all along it was my mum who singlehandedly brought us up. I think this shaped my mindset quite a lot. I always tell myself to strive for the best in my studies, don't waste my mum's money and efforts. It was never easy for her. So for me, at my age, what I can do is to focus on my studies, and hopefully get a degree and start earning some money so that she can take a rest.

Even though the Singaporean state conveys a strong neoliberal-style social message around meritocracy to promote a disciplined and hardworking citizenry (Tan 2012), Chee's narratives around hard work and perseverance were not direct products of this regime. Instead, they emerged from a specific constellation of family history and ongoing interpersonal dynamics between the parent and children. This is further revealed in the rest of the conversation:

Author: What about your brother? Younger or older?

Chee: Older. He ah... He is working now. He is a little, selfish, I would say? But he still contributes to the family, money wise, though not a lot. He is more occupied with his own life, doing his own things. He has his own way of thinking I guess.

Author: Is he detached to the family? I mean, are you closer to your mother?

Chee: I think I'm closer to my mum definitely. I spend a lot of time with her, because I feel that she's growing older by the day, and it's only right that we spend more time with her. I would say it's a way to show that I care for her, without explicitly saying it out.

Both Chee and Kit were not straightforwardly “taking care” of themselves through educational investment as the self-disciplining and self-responsibilising neoliberal subject who maximises individual gains (Peters 2001). Rather, they were practicing a different kind of self-care that is a vital component of intergenerational love, where care of the self is intertwined with performances of love towards the intimate “other” across generational relationships. Extant writings around family and intergenerational relationships in Singapore have pointed to a powerful state biopolitics in governing the realm of everyday moral and ethical lives, often in the interests of economic development and globalisation (Oswin 2010; Teo 2011; Ramdas 2014). For instance, Chee's concern with relieving the burden of his mother as the sole breadwinner can be understood as how the “moral citizen” is cultivated by the Singaporean state's neoliberal privatisation of care to individuals. But I argue that, in this instance, loving feelings and relationships cannot be reduced to a simplistic notion of neoliberal order. It is Chee's interpersonal ties with his mother that shored up his feelings of gratitude, and subsequently the desire to care, more so than the case of his elder brother. This is an expanded vision of love that moves beyond the strictures of neoliberal ideologies, even if it cannot be disentangled from them, to encompass a wider range of emotional qualities embedded within human relationships (Kraftl 2013; 2015).

## **Conclusions**

In this article, I have offered one way of doing critical geographies of higher education and student life that pays attention to lay normativity, and its constituent emotions and practices. This approach not only deepens an understanding of “actually existing neoliberalism” in its

embodied forms and particularities (Larner 2003; Collier and Ong 2005), but also generates a more delicate picture of neoliberal marketisation and its effects on educational spaces and subjects. In using a pragmatist interpretation of social practices (Ernste 2004; Barnes 2008; Wood and Smith 2008), I have focused on how students produce embodied reasoning and moral sentiments that lead to a range of caring practices and relations. Based on the three accounts of implicit normativity and care that explore the themes of deconstructive empathy, friendship solidarities, and intergenerational love, I have demonstrated how a critical analysis of education beyond “value” can open up fresh ways of thinking about student practices against the grain of an all-pervasive neoliberalism. Additionally, these caring practices have to be understood as political in that they constitute purposeful appropriation of “alternative” values to address concerns and change situations for the better. In doing so, this article makes two contributions to existing scholarship around higher educational geographies.

First, it brings nuance to academic and public discourses pertaining to the manner in which neo-liberal market values of competition and individualism are precipitating the attrition of a more “care-full” ethos in higher educational settings (Giroux 2003; Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon 2007; Seidler 2012). The presence of ordinary moral and ethical norms within student practices point to an ethos of relational care, rather than its corrosion, in the contemporary “neoliberal” campus. Extending this spatial consideration of informal care into the site of education adds to the range of spaces, practices, and subjects hitherto studied under the banner of geographies of care (Conradson 2003; Milligan and Wiles 2010; Bowlby 2011). I argue that future research on the normative geographies of higher education and student life can benefit from the multiple theorisations of care in existing literature, as well as forwarding novel concepts of care from the perspectives of student practices. For instance, in the section on “learning through islands of solidarities”, I have

shown that caring relations in the campus emerged from a shared sense of marginality, and that simple acts of learning together and giving mutual support constitute an important form of care. Additionally, the case of Jess provides insights into how care can be cultivated through other sites of learning, such as the church or within friendship bond, even when students may forget about caring in a competitive educational world. While higher education may continue to reproduce inequalities, it is also a site where (subtle forms of) transformative practices are possible (see Holdsworth and Quinn 2012).

Second, the article adds empirical flesh to nascent efforts within geographies of education and young people to explore relations of care, love, and intimacy as potential areas to read for alternative experiences of neoliberalising education (Kraftl 2013; 2015). I have shown that by looking for these instances within the sites of friendship and intergenerational relationship, a broader range of moral commitments and ethical sensibilities that underpin care are thrown into sharp relief. Christian notions of justice and unconditional responsibility towards others were key to how Jess cultivated a deconstructive empathy, which suggests potential for further engagement with how spirituality, faith, and religiosity are mobilised to produce more progressive forms of care (Holloway and Valins 2002; Cloke and Beaumont 2012). The manner in which students make use of space and time to negotiate the material conditions of a care-less and time-tied educational environment reminds us of how a cosmopolitan ethic of care can emerge in situations of loss, frustration, and alienation (Mitchell 2007; Jeffrey and McFarlane 2008). In these two vignettes, friendship continues to play an important role in young people's lives, where they "learn from each other, reinforce sense of self-esteem and have opportunities to broaden their spatialities" (Bunnell et al. 2012, 501). The theme of self-care as an expression of intergenerational love shows how the concepts of intergenerationality can be combined with theoretical insights on love and intimacy to construct new understandings of why people

invest in education (see Hopkins and Pain 2008; Horton and Kraftl 2008). These moments of caring and cross-community solidarity may take the form of small gestures and flicker into life from the “cultural substratum” of everyday practices in provisional, and sometimes surprising, ways (Jeffrey 2010, 94). Nevertheless, they provide a window into how students can “act differently” from the dominant image of a neoliberal calculative and individualistic subject.

Finally, it is instructive to add that giving attention to the normative dimension as a critical standpoint does not mean abandoning the weighty issues of power relations, politics of identity, and resistances. Rather, the point is to interrogate how ordinary notions of the “moral” and “ethical” may guide people’s practices in ways that push away from dominant neoliberal and capitalist regimes. This is an under-explored agenda that will provide a more expansive approach to consider lay normativity as an actually existing source of political pedagogies and actions, where people are seen as already having the capacities to act differently in the world.

### **Note**

1. In 2009, it was reported in the local news that Singapore has been listed six times by the Oregon’s Office of Degree Authorisation as a “degree mill” country (Davie 2009). This piece of news, as well as others about the closing down of several private degree institutes in the last few years, has since raised suspicion among locals of the legitimacy of private degrees.

### **References**

- Allen, J. 2008. Pragmatism and power, or the power to make a difference in a radically contingent world. *Geoforum* 39 (4):1613–1624.
- Allen, K., J. Quinn, S. Hollingworth, and A. Rose. 2013. Becoming employable students and “ideal” creative workers: exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (3):431–452.
- Anderson, B. 2006. Becoming and being hopeful: towards a theory of affect. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (5):733–752.

- Archer, L., S. Hollingworth, and A. Halsall. 2007. 'University's not for me -- I'm a Nike person': urban, working-class young people's negotiations of 'style', identity and educational engagement. *Sociology* 41 (2):219–37.
- Barnes, T 2008. American pragmatism: towards a geographical Introduction. *Geoforum* 39 (4):1542–54.
- Barnett, C. 2013. Geography and ethics III: From moral geographies to geographies of worth. *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (1):151–160.
- . 2012. Geography and ethics: placing life in the space of reasons. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (3):379–388.
- Barnett C, P. Cloke, N. Clarke, and A. Malpass. 2005. Consuming ethics: articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption. *Antipode* 37 (1):23-45.
- Bathmaker, A. M., N. Ingram, and R. Waller. 2013. Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (5-6):723–743.
- Blazek, M. 2013. Emotions as practice: Anna Freud's child psychoanalysis and thinking-doing children's emotional geographies. *Emotion, Space and Society* 9:24–32.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowlby, S. 2011. Friendship, co-presence and care: neglected spaces. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (6):605–22.
- Bunnell, T., S. Yea, L. Peake, T. Skelton, and M. Smith. 2012. Geographies of friendships. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (4):490–507.
- Bridge, G. 2005. *Reason in the City of Difference: Pragmatism, Communicative Action, and Contemporary Urbanism*. New York: Routledge.
- Burke, P. 2011. Masculinity, subjectivity and neoliberalism in men's accounts of migration and higher educational participation. *Gender and Education* 23 (2):169–84.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cheng, Y. 2015. Biopolitical geographies of student life: private higher education and citizenship life-making in Singapore. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (5): 1078-1093.
- Cloke, P., and J. Beaumont. 2012. Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city. *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (1):27–51.

- Collins, F. L., R. Sidhu, N. Lewis, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2014. Mobility and desire: international students and Asian regionalism in aspirational Singapore. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35 (5):661–676.
- Collier, S. J., and A. Ong. 2005. *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Conradson, D. 2003. Geographies of care: spaces, practices, experiences. *Social & Cultural Geography* 4 (4):451–54.
- Davidson, E. 2008. Marketing the self: the politics of aspiration among middle-class Silicon Valley youth. *Environment and Planning A* 40 (12):2814–30.
- Davie, S. 2009. S'pore on list of degree mill countries. *The Straits Times* 28 Nov: 8.
- Davie, S. 2011. Over 100,000 S'poreans seek degrees at private schools. *The Straits Times* 17 Oct: A1.
- Dyson, J. 2010. Friendship in practice: girls' work in the Indian Himalayas. *American Ethnologist* 37 (3):482–98.
- Elisha, O. 2008. Moral ambitions of grace: the paradox of compassion and accountability in evangelical faith-based activism. *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (1):154–89.
- Ernste, H. 2004. The pragmatism of life in poststructuralist times. *Environment and Planning A* 36 (3):437–50.
- Forbes, J., and B. Lingard. 2013. Elite school capitals and girls' schooling: understanding the (re)production of privilege through a habitus of 'assuredness'. In *Privilege, Agency and Affect: Understanding the Production and Effects of Action*, eds. C. Maxwell and P. Aggleton, 50-69, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freeman, C. 2011. Neoliberalism: embodying and affecting neoliberalism. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, ed. F. E. Mascia-Lees, 353–369. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Giroux, H. 2003. Youth, higher education, and the crisis of public time: educated hope and the possibility of a democratic future. *Social Identities* 9 (2):141–168.
- Häkli, J., and K. P. Kallio. 2013. Subject, action and polis: theorizing political agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2):181–200.
- Hobson, J. 2006. Environmental responsibility and the possibilities of pragmatist-orientated research. *Social & Cultural Geography* 7 (2): 283-298.
- Holdsworth, C., and J. Quinn. 2012. The epistemological challenge of higher education student volunteering: “reproductive” or “deconstructive” volunteering? *Antipode* 44 (2):386–405.

- Holloway, J., and V. Oliver. 2002. Editorial: placing religion and spirituality in Geography. *Social & Cultural Geography* 3 (1):5–9.
- Holt, L. 2008. Embodied social capital and geographic perspectives: performing the habitus. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (2):227–246.
- Holton, M., and M. Riley. 2013. Student geographies: exploring the diverse geographies of students and higher education. *Geography Compass* 7 (1):61–74.
- Hopkins, P., and R. Pain. 2008. Is there more to life? Relationalities in here and out there: a reply to Horton and Kraftl. *Area* 40 (2):289–92.
- Horton, J., and P. Kraftl. 2009. Small acts, kind words and "not too much fuss": implicit activism. *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (1):14–23.
- . 2008. Reflections on geographies of age: a response to Hopkins and Pain. *Area* 40 (2):284–88.
- Jeffrey, C. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Jeffrey, C., and J. Dyson. 2008. *Telling Young Lives: Portraits in Global Youth*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Jeffrey, C., and C. McFarlane. 2008. Performing cosmopolitanism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (3):420–427.
- Jeffrey, C., P. Jeffrey, and R. Jeffrey. 2008. *Degrees Without Freedom? Education, Masculinities and Unemployment in North India*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Koh, A. 2014. Doing class analysis in Singapore's elite education: unravelling the smokescreen of 'meritocratic talk'. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 12 (2):196–210.
- Koopman, C. 2011. Genealogical pragmatism: how history matters for Foucault and Dewey. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 5 (3):533–61.
- . 2010. Historicism in pragmatism: lessons in historiography and philosophy. *Metaphilosophy* 41 (5):690–713.
- Kraftl, P. 2015. Alter-childhoods: biopolitics and childhoods in alternative education spaces. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (1):219–237.
- . 2013. Towards geographies of "alternative" education: a case study of UK home schooling families. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38(3):436–50.
- . 2008. Young people, hope, and childhood-hope. *Space and Culture* 11 (2):81–92.
- Lahire, B. 2011. *The Plural Actor*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Larner, W. 2003. Neoliberalism? *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21:509-512.
- Liu, F. 2008. Constructing the autonomous middle-class self in today's China: the case of young-adult only-children university students. *Journal of Youth Studies* 11 (2):193–212.
- Lynch, K., M. Lyons, and S. Cantillon. 2007. Breaking silence: educating citizens for love, care and solidarity. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 17 (1-2):1–19.
- McCormack, D. 2003. An event of geographical ethics in spaces of affect. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (4):488–507.
- McDowell, L. 2006. Reconfigurations of gender and class relations: class differences, class condescension and the changing place of class relations. *Antipode* 38 (4):825–850.
- . 2004. Work , workfare, work/life balance and an ethic of care. *Progress in Human Geography* 28 (2):145-163.
- MOE (Ministry of Education). 2012. *Report on the Committee on University Education Pathways Beyond 2015: final report*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- Miller, D. 2010. Anthropology in blue jeans. *American Ethnologist* 37 (3):415–28.
- Milligan, C., and J. Wiles. 2010. Landscapes of care. *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (6):736–54.
- Mitchell, K. 2007. Geographies of identity: the intimate cosmopolitan. *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (5):706–720.
- Olson, E., and A. Sayer. 2009 Radical geography and its critical standpoints: embracing the normative. *Antipode* 41 (1):180–198.
- Oswin, N. 2010. The modern model family at home in Singapore: a queer geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2):256–268.
- Pedwell, C. 2012a. Affective (self-) transformations: empathy, neoliberalism and international development. *Feminist Theory* 13(2):163–79.
- . 2012b. Economies of empathy: Obama, neoliberalism, and social justice. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30(2):280–97.
- Peters, M. 2001. Education, enterprise culture and the entrepreneurial self : a Foucauldian perspective. *Journal of Educational Enquiry* 2 (2):58–71.
- Ramdas, K. 2014. Is blood thicker than water? Single Indian Singaporean women and the geographies of “being” family. *Gender, Place & Culture* 22 (2):255–270.
- Reay, D., G. Crozier, and J. Clayton. 2009. “Strangers in paradise”? Working-class tudents in elite universities. *Sociology* 43 (6):1103–1121.
- Rorty, R. 1996. The ambiguity of ‘rationality’. *Constellations* 3(1):73–82.

- Rouse, J. 2007. Social practices and normativity. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 37(1):46–56.
- Sayer, A. 2005. Class, moral worth and recognition. *Sociology* 39 (5):947–963.
- . 2003. (De)commodification, consumer culture, and moral economy. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21:341–57.
- Seidler, V. 2012. Higher education, markets, and emotional values. *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 10 (3):228–45.
- Sidhu, R., K. C. Ho, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2011. Emerging education hubs: the case of Singapore. *Higher Education* 61 (1):23–40.
- Skeggs, B. 2014. Values beyond value? Is anything beyond the logic of capital? *The British journal of sociology* 65 (1):1–20.
- . 2011. Imagining personhood differently: person value and autonomist working-class value practices. *Sociological Review* 59 (3):496–513.
- . 2004. Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and ‘the Self’. *The Sociological Review* 52 (S2):75–95.
- Spencer, L., and R. Pahl. 2006. *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Staeheli, L., and M. Brown. 2003. Where has welfare gone? Introductory remarks on the geographies of care and welfare. *Environment and Planning A* 35 (5):771–777.
- Tan, K. P. 2012. The ideology of pragmatism: neo-liberal globalisation and political authoritarianism in Singapore. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42 (1):67–92.
- Teo, Y. Y. 2011. *Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How Family Policies Make State and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Thrift, N. 2004. Intensities of feeling: towards a spatial politics of affect. *Geografiska Annaler Series B* 86:57–78.
- Walkerdine, V. 2003. Reclassifying upward mobility: femininity and the neo-liberal subject. *Gender and Education* 15 (3):237–248.
- Waring, P. 2013. Singapore’s global schoolhouse strategy: retreat or recalibration? *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (5):874–884.
- Waters, J. L., R. Brooks, and H. Pimlott-Wilson. 2011. Youthful escapes? British students, overseas education and the pursuit of happiness. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (5):455–469.
- Waters, J. L., and M. Leung. 2014. “These are not the best students”: continuing education, transnationalisation and Hong Kong’s young adult “educational non-elite.” *Children’s Geographies* 12 (1):56–69.

- Wood, N., and S. J. Smith. 2008. Pragmatism and geography. *Geoforum* 39:1527–29.
- Ye, R., and E. Nylander. 2015. The transnational track: state sponsorship and Singapore's Oxbridge elite. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (1):11–33.
- Yoon, K. 2014. Transnational youth mobility in the neoliberal economy of experience. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (8):1014–1028.

## **Educated Non-elites and Locally Enacted Cosmopolitanisms: Private Degree Students in Globalising Singapore**

### **Abstract**

In this article, I explore a range of locally enacted cosmopolitanisms by a segment of educated non-elite youth in Singapore. Drawing on fieldwork over a period of eleven months at a private higher educational institute, I discuss how students draw on different resources to construct themselves, as well as their campus experiences, as “cosmopolitan”. Specifically, I argue that educated non-elite young people perform three forms of cosmopolitan spatiality – rooted cosmopolitanisms, cosmopolitan learnings, and unanticipated cosmopolitanisms – which confound its dominant framings within international/transnational education as an elite cultural capital or disposition. Exploring cosmopolitanism as locally enacted spatialities in globalising higher education can potentially reveal forms of openness that are counterintuitive to its corporatist, western-centric, and elitist conceptions. *Key Words: cosmopolitanisms, educated non-elites, globalisation, higher education, Singapore*

### **Introduction**

During my research on young people’s constructions of citizenship through higher education in Singapore between 2013 and 2014, I spoke to students about their everyday experiences at a local private educational institute. These local students – commonly referred to as private degree students – represent a segment of the globalising city-state’s educated non-elites. In one of the group conversations, Kit said to me, “Maybe we are considered a heartland university, for ordinary people like us who are not the elite and smart enough to get into better universities, but also not so rich we can go overseas to study.” Elson retorted, in a somewhat defensive tone, “We are not that heartland *leh*. Our education is quite globally-oriented, and we also have a lot of international students in our campus, just that mostly are Asians.” Jack added to the conversation, “Actually we study the same thing as students in, say, London and Australia, so maybe the only difference is we don’t get to physically immerse in their cultures.”

The students’ experiences of the campus as simultaneously “global” and “local”, including the contestation over what is meant by “heartland” and “international”, raises important issues about transnationalism, im/mobility, global-ness, cultural diversity, and class division.

While these issues are distinct and may be separately explored, they also coalesce around the contested notion of cosmopolitanism. The notion of a “heartland university” invokes an image of the educational institute as local, small-scale, and homespun: an educational space for the ordinary and non-elite. It also carries classed connotations that are entangled in broader state constructions of the “cosmopolitan” versus the “heartlander” citizen, whereby the former is globally-oriented while the latter retains a parochial outlook in life.

Empirical studies on globalisation and higher education have tended to neglect the complex articulations of cosmopolitanism like the ones I observed during ethnographic work with students. Scholars have commonly framed cosmopolitanism in a manner that is underpinned by corporatist and elitist views (Rizvi 2009). This version of cosmopolitanism celebrates individuals who are able to take advantage of international mobility, navigate cultural difference and diversity, possess class-consciousness of the transnational elites, and with a penchant for becoming the footloose soldiers of global capital. Within this framing, cosmopolitanism is understood as an elite cultural capital or competency that is required to navigate the global knowledge economy (Ziguras and Law 2006; Brown and Tannock 2009). Cosmopolitan openness, therefore, is typically conceptualised as a strategic resource for students to fashion themselves into the ideal cosmopolitan subject of the twenty-first century’s educational hegemony (Mitchell 2003). But as the opening vignette suggests, ordinary performances of cosmopolitanisms are more vibrant and contested than what has been acknowledged by scholars at large.

This article explores locally enacted forms of cosmopolitanisms from a specific spatial configuration of international/transnational higher education, through the lens of students enrolled in a private educational institute in contemporary Singapore. In particular, I consider the ways students construct variegated versions of cosmopolitan citizenship by

drawing on a range of practical, emotional, and moral considerations. The central argument is that educated non-elite youth produce cosmopolitan sensibilities and practices that do not neatly cohere with or may even radically depart from forms of worldliness pedalled by powerful institutions.

### **Unpacking cosmopolitanism in globalising education**

Recent scholarship on young people pursuing forms of “global” education, whether through educational migration or international schooling, has conceptualised cosmopolitanism as a form of cultural and social capital that can be converted into economic gains. It is now widely documented that Asian students and their parents engage with middle-class reproduction through the pursuit of overseas education, where they perceive international (and in many cases “western”) forms of educational credentials as a superior cultural capital (Waters 2008; Xiang and Shen 2009; Huang and Yeoh 2011; Cheng 2014). These educational strategies are typically framed within the idea that overseas credentials serve as a prized form of cosmopolitan cultural capital. Relatedly, cosmopolitanism has also been theorised as a set of embodied dispositions and outlooks that individuals can strategically draw on to reconstitute their subjectivity. Students are described as engaging in strategies of self-cultivation that involve exposure to foreign cultures (“overseas experience”), learning a foreign (western) language, or even the development of a more “progressive” or “democratic” worldview (Matthews and Sidhu 2005; Abelman, Park and Kim 2009; Kim 2011; Farrer and Greenspan 2015). In doing so, they are able to fashion themselves into flexible, mobile, and highly educated citizen-subjects endorsed by dominant state projects of cosmopolitanism. Across these works, scholars argue that cosmopolitanism acts as a proxy for social differentiation that students use to place themselves in an advantageous position in the global economy (see Igarashi and Saito 2014). By implication, cosmopolitanism is often seen as serving the interests of powerful actors such as the state or

social elites while excluding those who do not or are unable to possess it (Harvey 2000; Yeoh 2004)

Current analyses of cosmopolitanism as a combination of socio-economic status, cultural capital, and consumer power raise three interrelated problems. First, there is a tendency for cosmopolitanism to be discussed by scholars as accessible only by those who occupy more advantageous positions in the stratified social field of education. In the words of Kothari (2008, 501), this view fails to “interrogate sufficiently how these markers of difference, between “self” and “other”, are founded upon particular historical and dichotomous relations between, for example, colonized and colonizer and Third and First Worlds”. Second, this discourse of cosmopolitanism forecloses alternative articulations of worldliness and pathologises those who are not involved in the competition for ostensibly cosmopolitan cultural capital as “unfinished” cosmopolitan citizens. Third, this conception of cosmopolitanism is forged in the image of mobile subjects who seek to construct global identities that are seemingly non-local and in opposition to place-based affiliations. As a result, it perpetuates a depiction of the cosmopolitan subject as a footloose individual who aspires towards transnational mobility and lifestyle.

Relatively fresh ideas about cosmopolitanism emerging in recent geographical writings have adopted a more practice-oriented approach to theorising cosmopolitanism. Here, cosmopolitanism is understood as constituted through sets of cultural repertoires or resources differently available to people from across a range of contexts and social backgrounds. Such “vernacular” forms of cosmopolitanism are not only grounded in the everyday experiences of ordinary, non-elite people, including what they eat, learn, and dream about (Bishop 2011; Yeoh and Soco 2014), but also part of the discursive and practical resources for them to manage and negotiate emergent, everyday issues related to

“global” difference and diversity (Gidwani 2006; Kothari 2008; see also Jeffrey and McFarlane 2008). Viewing cosmopolitanism as a form of openness that emerges from people’s local interactions and responses to global realities can provide a way to overcome the problematic confinement of cosmopolitan identities and sensibilities to exclusive circuits of powerful actors. However, many of these writings have hitherto focused on the working-class and subaltern populations, which risk inventing a new binary between “elite” and “non-elite” cosmopolitanisms.

As recent studies have shown, there is now a section of educated middle-class youth who occupy neither elite nor subaltern positions (Roberts 2013; Woodman 2013; Cairns, Growiec and Alves 2014). Young people caught within these “middling” positions fall outside the hegemonic category of globally mobile educated cosmopolitans who serve as the model of ideal middle-class citizenship. But they are also not the most economically disadvantaged and immobile group in the urban economy. This section of educated young people are often those “who are ambivalently placed with respect to capital and labour” (Jeffrey and McFarlane 2008, 424). The under-examined experiences of educated but non-elite youth in various situations provide a critical lens to re-evaluate conventional dualisms of cosmopolitanism and parochialism, global and local, and mobility and immobility ( Skrbis and Woodward 2007; Jeffrey 2008; Woronov 2011; Waters and Leung 2013). For instance, Waters and Leung’s (2013) study of Hong Kong educational non-elites demonstrated the limited extent to which students can reconstitute themselves as “international”. Woronov’s (2011) work on Chinese students in a vocational school, however, showed that students could produce their own class-based moral regime to construct themselves as urban cosmopolites. Apart from this small pool of studies, very little is known about how this particular group of people produce their own cosmopolitan aspirations and subjectivities.

The goal here is to eschew a narrow idea of cosmopolitanism and to open up more diverse ways of understanding the concept through student narratives and practices. Therefore, I propose a view of cosmopolitanism as locally enacted spatialities that lead to different forms of openness. These spatialities can be performed through various cultural repertoires or resources, including mobilities (including those arising from consumerist objects), symbolic competencies to navigate difference, and a willingness to engage with alterity (Skrbis and Woodward 2007). This expansive definition is particularly useful for underlining how different subjects perform cosmopolitanisms in their own ways, but has hitherto been hidden by a corporatist and economistic version of the concept.

### **Globalising higher education in “Cosmopolis” Singapore**

The Singaporean state discourse of cosmopolitanism is highly engineered and deeply embedded in the logics of neoliberal economic globalisation, privileging people who possess elite educational capital, social networks, and embody global mobility. The term “Cosmopolis” was first introduced in 1999 to fashion Singapore in the image of cosmopolitan ideals, drawing on the language of culture and sophistication, as well as that of multiculturalism and social diversity (Yeoh 2004). “Cosmopolitans”, within the state discourse, are those who possess an international outlook that helps them navigate work and adapt to different cities in the world. If cosmopolitans are characterised by their mobility, high educational level, and flexibility, then “heartlanders” – the counter figure to the “cosmopolitans” – refer to those majority who tend to be rooted, study and work locally, and are concerned with more parochial issues such as everyday livelihood rather than participating in sophisticated activities (Ho 2006). Writing on the state’s use of housing landscape to create particular citizen-subjects, Teo (2014, 921) further identified two kinds of “rooted” cosmopolitans: the “intimate cosmopolitan” who participates in global economy and lifestyles while maintaining sentimental roots to Singapore, and the “self-sacrificing

heartlander” who makes a living within the country and are parochially oriented to maintain the state’s core social values. The purported parochialism and local-ness of the “heartlanders” has its origins in the preceding term “heartland”, which first appeared in 1991 on the main local newspaper to describe the public housing neighbourhoods, including those “local tastes, small businesses, and something more homespun” in contrast to the high-end upmarket areas in the city centre (Poon 2013, 562). In describing current-day cosmopolitanism in Singapore, Yeoh (2013, 102) eloquently summarises,

national narratives on cosmopolitanism (as formulated by Singapore’s political elites operating in a highly centralised system), while they draw selectively on cosmopolitan imaginings of the colonial past and build in highly contradictory ways on the multi-racialism of post-independence times, are constructed with an eye on the future. They are much more part of state-imposed projects to purposively “cosmopolise” the city and its people to ensure its place amidst a global future than sensibilities that emerge from the tumult of Singaporean society.

Indeed, there is now a plethora of literature that criticises the manner in which state-engineered cosmopolitanism in Singapore has sought to include racialised (officially categorised as “Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other”), hetero-sexualised, and economically productive (“foreign talent” and “skilled labour”) bodies through a narrow construction of multiculturalism and diversity (Ho 2006; 2011; Ye and Kelly 2011; Yeoh 2004; 2013). With the exception of a handful of research, there is little focus on how Singaporean state-vaunted narratives of cosmopolitanism are contested and redefined by ordinary people. Ho’s (2006) work on Singaporean citizens negotiating notions of belonging through the state-construct of the “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” binary offers some clue to the existence of rooted cosmopolitanism (Appiah 1997) among some local educated youth (between 18 and 30 years old). She highlighted that for these people, instead of identifying themselves as “being distinctly ‘cosmopolitan’ (global) or ‘heartlander’ (local)... the global and the local dissolve into closely related versions of each other” (Ho 2006, 391). However, there is also evidence that young people’s views of cosmopolitanism continue to be strongly

associated with international mobility such as studying in overseas universities, working in global cities in the west, and living a lifestyle of the global elites (Chen 2014). To this end, cosmopolitan imaginations amongst the young in Singapore are strongly informed by the hierarchical ordering of global privilege, education, and work under the state's vision of a "cosmopolis", rather than the counterpart curricular message around staying local and taking roots. Such perceptions also resonate with a recently published survey conducted in 2013 on youth aspirations, which revealed that 61.5 per cent of those surveyed have considered moving overseas to pursue education, to gain experience for personal growth, and for career advancement (TodayOnline 2014). In the same article, a student was quoted, "Young Singaporeans today do not see themselves bound by geography. The world is a global village and we have opportunities out there for education, leisure and work".

The globalising city-state of Singapore provides an illuminating case to study cosmopolitan citizenship among an emerging segment of educated non-elite youth. As part of the state efforts to cosmopolise the city-state, the government designed the "Global Schoolhouse" project to transform Singapore into a hub for international education, a focal point of creativity and intellect, and an incubator for knowledge and innovation (Olds 2007; Sidhu, Ho and Yeoh 2011). In addition to transforming the local public universities into global centres of research and innovation excellence, part of the Global Schoolhouse plan was aimed at encouraging "private providers to grow, facilitating partnerships between institutions and attracting new players into the (educational) market" (Ministry of Trade and Industry Singapore, cited in Waring 2013). In recent years, rising competition for entrance into local public universities has seen a segment of local youth turned to private educational institutes to pursue degree education. By 2012, there was an estimated 47,500 Singaporeans enrolled in full-time and part-time undergraduate degree programmes in the city's four largest private institutes. This sizeable student population has grown to match the number of

Singaporeans enrolled into the local public universities, which was estimated to be just over 45,000 in the same year.

Private degree students represent a section of young people who are ambivalently placed in the government's agenda to cosmopolise Singapore as a knowledge and talent capital (Yeoh 2013). Within the globalising city-state, the educational hierarchy has long been structured in a manner that privileges "western" overseas universities – as reflected in the government's practice of sending the "brightest" students abroad for university education in the global North under prestigious scholarship schemes – and followed by a more "localised" competition amongst the public universities (Ye and Nylander 2015). Private educational institutes, as the "new kid on the block" without the established resources and reputation relative to the local universities, are categorically pushed to the bottom rung of this hierarchy. Local students enrolled into private educational institutes are structurally constituted as "educated non-elites" in the state's vision of Singapore as an epicentre of knowledge and talent. However, many of them are also privileged enough to be able to pursue university education, unlike those who have been streamed into educational tracks that led them to vocational and technical institutes (Chong 2014), or those who have no financial means to pursue higher education.

The ethnographic fieldwork is conducted in one such institute, hereafter named Singapore Private Institute (SPI). SPI caters to fresh A-level and diploma graduates, as well as to working-adults who wish to upgrade their existing credentials through short-term "upgrading" programs. It offers both part-time and full-time degree programs spanning across social sciences to business and marketing, through a mixture of locally certified degree courses as well as transnational degree programs in partnership with overseas universities. These transnational degree programs offer a wide array of overseas credentials

from reputable partner universities, such the University of London from the UK, the University of Buffalo from the States, and the RMIT from Australia. Much of the fieldwork involved multiple visits to the campus during the course of research and spoke to students opportunistically. On a typical visit, I spend around three hours walking around the campus and approaching students to start a conversation. In addition to these on-site interactions with students, I invited eighteen male and seventeen female students for in-depth interviews in a mixture of individual and group settings. These typically took around ninety minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured around the pre-identified topics of schooling history; reasons to pursue degree education; personal goals in life; and perceptions of Singapore's education system. All my interviewees identified as the "average Singaporean" from "middle-class" backgrounds, even though a few of them are from wealthier families (as indicated by their residential type) on the one hand, and some had to take up part-time jobs in order partially to fund their expenses for education and living on the other hand.

### **Student performances of cosmopolitanism**

Private degree students perform three vernacular forms of cosmopolitan spatialities that circumvent a neoliberal-style "cosmopolitanism" deeply embedded in the Singaporean state discourse. First, I demonstrate how their work aspirations are constituted through orientations that are simultaneously "rooted" and "global". Second, I discuss the ways in which students invoke trans-local cultural connectivities through formal and informal learning experiences. In the process, they scale their cosmopolitan identities "upwards" to become global, and "outwards" to appreciate difference and diversity. Third, I explore some ways in which students perform cosmopolitan sensibilities that are counterintuitive to and unanticipated by the state's hegemonic construct of the cosmopolitan subject in contemporary Singapore.

***Rooted cosmopolitanism: negotiating working aspirations***

Private degree students' working aspirations are entangled into a web of different practical, emotional, and moral considerations. These include the emphasis they place on existing local ties, their dis-identifications with the hypermobile elite cosmopolitan, and self-valuations of cultural capital. As a result, they produce narratives of work aspirations that confound the popular image of educated Singaporeans as straightforwardly globally oriented. Students whom I have met often spoke about seeking opportunities in the local job market. When I questioned them about the possibility of working abroad, many of them said that they have not entertained the idea. The most prominent narrative found amongst students is that of a "territorialised" vision of life transition, with a view of the future that is centred on practical concerns and grounded in the "local". Kelvin's narrative exemplifies this:

I never thought of that (working overseas). My plan is to find a job in Singapore and just work a few years, save up some money, buy a HDB (Housing Development Board) flat (i.e. public housing), and settle down with my girlfriend here. Plus I am not the typical high flyer, you know. I'm mainly doing this degree so I can have better career prospects in future.

Even though the idea that education serves as a vital resource for young people to navigate life transitions is a well-rehearsed one in existing literature, it is instructive to note that this is the result of a deliberate stitching together of education, work, and family by the Singaporean state biopolitical regime to ensure social reproduction of capital and labour. What is particularly revealing from Kelvin's narrative is the way this transition is spatialised and classed: while his version is non-elite and "localised", the transitions of those who belong to the category of the "high flyer" may be less *in situ*.

For many students, negotiating the “global/local” involves a measure of moral reasoning guided by emotional attachments to existing affiliations, as well as that of classed sentiments Sheena’s narrative is illustrative of this:

I don't think I can survive working overseas. My friends and family are here. I also don't think my background is suitable to stay overseas for long period. I mean I'm a very local person, I don't have much travelling experience, unlike the more well off people, since young they get to travel, study overseas because their parents have the money. Some of my classmates, those richer ones who can afford, they are thinking of going London to do their Masters after this, because they say the degree is from London and so higher chances, then maybe stay there and work. I don't think it's that easy though, because they will know our degree is from Singapore and not in the main London university. *Ok lah*, maybe they want that kind of lifestyle, see the world. Not say I don't want to see the world, but if I work overseas, my parents how? Actually, this is just my personal opinion, I feel that these people can be quite selfish because they only think about their own lives and not their parents.

Even as Sheena indicated a degree of desire to “see the world”, this sort of global outlook gave way to a strong sense of place-based attachment mediated by familial and friendship ties, as well as a feeling of responsibility to stay for/with the parents. There is also a degree of anti-elitist sentiment that can be observed from the way Sheena conveyed her disdain for the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the “well off people”, who may be endowed with financial resources to travel and study abroad, but are individualistic and morally compromised. This group of cosmopolitan elites resonates with Kelvin’s reference to the figure of the “high flyer”, a term that aptly captures the seeming footloose characteristic of elite cosmopolitans. At first glance, Sheena appears to embody the Singapore-style “heartlander”. However, the way Sheena anchored her identity as a “very local person” is substantially shaped by her active dis-identification from a specific type of consumerist and elitist cosmopolitanism (Binnie et al. 2009). Therefore, her sense of rootedness does not reflect a predisposition of parochialism that is typically assumed of the “heartlander”.

The manner in which students negotiate the geography of their work aspirations was also partially influenced by their own evaluations about the locations where they can profit from the degree. In the case of Kelvin, the degree is viewed as a practical cultural asset that helps to improve the self as human capital in the local job market. This is in contrast to the students in Sheena's account, who plan on using the degree as a ticket to further their accumulation strategy in London. Nonetheless, Sheena was less optimistic of her friends' vision as she felt that the degree awarded by the local institute is different from and less valued than the one awarded by the overseas university itself, even if they bear the same "branding" (c.f. Waters and Leung 2014). Additionally, there was also indication that Sheena did not feel adequately equipped with the embodied capital in the form of "travelling experience" to be "suitable to stay overseas for long period".

But even as students construct their work aspirations in ways that are ostensibly geographically circumscribed, their constructions of the future workplace are strikingly "global" and illuminating of how they espouse a "worldly" outlook. Both Kelvin and Sheena talked about their hopes to work in the global banking industry and expressed a degree of openness to working in an internationalised work environment. Kelvin in particular had secured an internship at one of these global banks in Singapore and told me he "enjoyed the time there because the environment is very dynamic and international, which has broadened [his] horizons". The following excerpt from a group discussion further demonstrates how students imagine their workplaces as characterised by transnational flows of people and ideas, but also as a space for encountering and learning from difference:

Author: What kinds of jobs do both of you have in mind after graduating?

Gan: Since I specialise in advertising, I hope to work in an advertising firm here (in Singapore).

Song: I specialise in financial, so either a bank or anything in the financial sector.

Author: Not thinking of venturing beyond Singapore, maybe to gain international experience or expose to different cultures?

Song: We can get that even if we work in Singapore. I mean the financial sector is very international actually, in terms of people and the nature of the job. Essentially we are dealing with the global economic situation, not just Singapore. Also if I get to work in those bigger firms or banks, I'm sure there are opportunities to meet colleagues from different international backgrounds, learn about cultures.

Gan: For me, I'm not sure whether advertising will be like banking, which will be very international. But maybe when we deal with overseas clients, or even when researching for ideas, all these are considered exposure to culture right?

Song constructs a vision of work in the financial sector as “very international” by invoking an image of the workplace as a multi-national environment, where the job scope entails everyday dealings with global cultures. This vision reflects a dominant image of Singapore’s financial workplace as a cosmopolitan site where global corporate citizenship can potentially be forged (Beaverstock 2002). While this form of cosmopolitanism has been found to privilege the corporate masculine subject rather than a genuine openness to diversity (Ye and Kelly 2011), Song was using it as a cultural resource to escape from accusations of parochialism often tied to geographical rootedness, as well as to “learn about cultures”. Also, as indicated in Gan’s narrative, cosmopolitan imaginations are not restricted to workplaces that appear to be obviously “international”. They are also located in less spectacular spaces that are not immediately associated with “global” cultures, but nevertheless presented with the occasional cross-cultural encounters through travelling people and ideas, thereby opening up spaces for opportunities to engage with difference.

Private degree students express ambivalent views about the global and local when reflecting on their working aspirations. They nevertheless maintain a globally oriented outlook in their imagination of the future workplace. Hence, these educated non-elites perform a form of cosmopolitanism that oscillates between “rootedness” and “worldliness”. This finding echoes both Ho’s (2006) research finding as well as Appiah’s (1997) suggestion that

cosmopolitans can be attached morally and emotionally to their cultural communities, but at the same time being opened to the presence and ideas of difference. In doing so, I also hinted at the ways in which cosmopolitanism works as a set of imaginaries and practices, allowing these students to traverse spatial boundaries and perform a sense of openness to cultural diversity. In the next section, I focus on students' learning experiences to discuss how cosmopolitan identities and sensibilities are produced and negotiated within the campus.

### ***Cosmopolitan learnings: strategic identities and fragmented openness***

Students often draw on the “transnational” or “global” nature of their curricular content to construct themselves as learners *in situ* who are learning *ex situ*. Some of them are quite explicit about how this constitutes a strategic effort to polish up their student identities. Such efforts are mainly framed as a necessary strategy to compete with their counterparts from the local public universities, and to a lesser extent those overseas students. Private degree students generally do not account for the overseas students (i.e. the cosmopolitan others), who are mostly government scholars with a bond to fulfil in local civil service jobs after they complete their studies, in their narratives around job competition. As a student once commented, “we are not in the same league as them, and they already have jobs back here waiting for them”. Shao elaborated how he sculpts a global student and learner identity in order to market himself to future employers:

Shao: Nowadays everyone is talking about the importance of global education, becoming a global learner. You see even the public universities have all sorts of global collaborations, for example the Yale-NUS, then global this, global that. This is something employers will look out for when we apply for jobs next time, so we cannot lose out in this aspect.

Author: But to you what is meant by global? Is it just a branding or you think there's more than that?

Shao: I think it is about the branding, definitely. It's about creating a brand for your school, and for yourself as a student. Next time when you present your resume to your employers, they see keywords like international, global, then it's more impressive.

Author: So it's about resume and marketing yourself...

Shao: Like my course is from UK, so maybe I can play on that during interviews and say I learn from examples in the UK, have a comparative perspective.

Shao's version of cosmopolitan learning may be understood as singularly focused on capital accumulation under neo-liberal discourses and therefore a variant of Mitchell's (2003) "strategic cosmopolitan". While Shao shared confidently about how he can brand himself as potential job candidate who has acquired a UK degree, as well as a global perspective by mobilising curricular knowledge from his course, one particular student, Jack, studying for an Australian degree felt that this strategy might not work for him. He said, "Australian degrees are very common, they are like the bottom tier compare to degrees from UK and American universities". This hierarchical ordering of the degree by their universities adds complexity to Sheena's earlier narrative of the devaluation of overseas degrees once they travel out of their countries, by illustrating how their values are further fractured across regional differentiation. This firstly reinforces the point that the value of institutionalised cultural capital is not unambiguous, but is instead defined in and through spatial negotiations (Waters 2009). Second, it echoes the global hierarchy of educational capital that privileges the global North. In this instance, cosmopolitan imagination becomes pulled back into its normative form that reproduces cosmopolitanism's place in the "west". But this is not to say Jack cannot perform a cosmopolitan identity and sensibility. On the contrary, Jack performs an interesting and unanticipated way to be cosmopolitan, to which I will return in the final section.

There are other students who endorsed similar strategies to "scale up" their cosmopolitan identities, but at the same time emphasised the importance of scaling their cosmopolitan

selves in an “outward” manner. They do this by way of learning to be accepting of difference and diversity, as well as how they themselves are connected to places afar. They are developing what Massey (1997) calls a “global sense of place”, rather than learning solely in the service of national interests. For instance, some students cited examples of acquiring valuable lessons to become “better” persons more broadly, as compared to being focused on securing better opportunities in the labour market or to maintain state-promoted national values. These examples included the incorporation of topics on cross-cultural communication and understanding, ethics, and global responsibility into their formal curriculum. Even as the curricular emphasis on these cultural competencies constitutes a broader shift in educational imperatives to prepare students for a globalised labour market, the students are also gaining critical insights and learning to examine the political meanings of inter-cultural experiences, rather than simply accepting them as a “branding” strategy:

I learned about cross-cultural communication, how to convey ideas to people from different backgrounds. Topics like cultural diversity, like respect, not to stereotype others whom you don't really know. (Wyn, psychology major)

There's this module on marketing ethics. Basically it teaches us issues such as honesty, vulnerable target groups, deception all these. I think all these made me more aware, it's not just about making money, it's also about being ethical. (Keith, marketing major)

We touch on corporate social responsibility before. It's part of business ethics and so we learn about how corporate actions in on place can have impact on environment and people in other places. Like those sweat shop factories, exploitation. All these are very interesting and I think it broadened my horizons in this sense. (Chee, business major)

The narratives cited above indicate how students are able to develop cosmopolitan sensibilities through a process of learning in the specific contexts of their curricular exposure. This sort of cosmopolitan learning is defined as a “way of learning about our own social identities and cultural trajectories, but always in ways that underscore their connectivity with the rest of the world” (Rizvi 2009, 264). Though it must also be caveated

that the degree to which such learning occurs is largely dependent on the individual student's subject specialisation. For instance, I spoke to students majoring in finance and banking who explained that their courses dealt with theory and economic principles, leaving them hard to identify clear-cut examples such as the ones given by Wyn, Keith and Chee.

Cosmopolitan learning also occurs outside of the formal curricular content. Students reflect on their experiences from internships, overseas exchange, and extra-curricular activities to construct themselves as cosmopolitans in those international and multicultural settings. They spoke about the ways they built camaraderie and solidarity not only with Singaporeans of different backgrounds, but also build bridges across differences across nationalities. Based on my own observations, students are most often seen hanging out in co-ethnic groups as well as by distinct nationalities on the campus. But instead of using these observations as counter-evidence of the students' claims, I would suggest that the everyday realities of cosmopolitanism in the campus works through the co-existence of cross-cultural mingling and interactions alongside the micro-politics of embodied difference. Here, I maintain a more optimistic view that accepts the possibility of "thrown togetherness" (Massey 2005, 181) where identities and affiliations are constantly made and re-worked. Amin (2006) has also argued that encounters with difference are contextualised and emergent, allowing cosmopolitanisms to emerge within moments of tensions and frictions. Therefore, it is through these moments of "mixing", "rubbing against", and "partial openness" that cosmopolitan learning can be put to practice. I highlight two vignettes to elaborate this point.

The first vignette draws from a group discussion centred on talking about students' experiences of their lectures. I was particularly interested in this aspect because I had no access to their lectures and tutorial classes. Also, I wanted to know how their educational

experiences of transnational degree programs might be shaped by who the lecturers were and where they had come from. The four students involved in the discussion were studying for a degree in marketing from a UK university. Three of them were Chinese and one Malay. The students explained that a lecturer from the UK university would “fly in” and provide a crash course, mainly introductory, for the students. Subsequently, a local lecturer would take over the delivery of classes. I intuitively assumed that this had, in some ways, eroded the “authentic” experience of studying in a UK-based degree program. However, all of them disagreed and defended the program by asserting its “globalised” curriculum such as the incorporation of case studies from different parts of the world, as well as the benefits of having a non-English lecturer. One student said, “Actually I prefer it this way. I couldn’t understand the UK lecturer’s accent.” The Malay student continued, with reference to his friends at the discussion,

We are more comfortable with the Singaporean English accent. I mean if let’s say you speak to us in British accent because you study there, we can still communicate. But for lecturing, with all the theories, technical jargons, it will be difficult to catch.

The rest in the group nodded in agreement. At this point, one of them deliberately switched accent into “proper” English (as opposed to Singlish) and stressed the point about their ability to communicate effectively. The students burst into laughter, finding that act somehow amusing. The students also had differing opinions about the use of non-Singaporean based case studies in their courses. One felt that “it’s a good way to learn from other sources”, while another preferred more local examples are given as she can identify with and understand them more easily. What this vignette demonstrated was the multi-layered nature of actual cosmopolitanisms emerging from students’ encounter with difference. While they espouse the “global-ness” of their courses and assert those cosmopolitan identities constructed through learning from the global context, their openness to foreign others is partial and fragmented. In this instance, their embodied preferences are

marked by a familiarity-strange binary that students have acquired from the immediate, local environment that they grew up in. But even within such partial openness, we continue to catch glimpses into how students actually have the capacity to traverse boundaries between sameness and difference. That moment in which the student switched his accent, as well as the fact that I was interacting with an ethnically mixed group, are evocative of such traversals.

Another way that cosmopolitan learning emerged from the ongoing negotiation of embodied difference concerns the way some private degree students saw me as the “cosmopolitan other” due to my identity as a highly educated Singaporean studying in an elite British university. To these students, I embody the hypermobile elite cosmopolitan, somebody from a different class and league. A student once commented, “Oxford University *leh*, so *atas* (high-class). So you must be very smart *lah*.” Subsequently in the course of fieldwork, I chose to only partially disclose my identity – not actively proclaiming the specific university I am from right from the beginning. To my surprise, students appeared to be less guarded and were more open to striking up and sustaining conversations, even after I revealed my university affiliation. This vignette illustrates that openness to difference is a way of relating to others in the world resulting from practical negotiations, rather than a fixed disposition. In other words, learning is part and parcel of how cosmopolitan sensibilities are (re)worked.

As Kothari (2008, 512) writes, forms of openness to others “that emerge out of practical, strategic, and localised needs are rarely acknowledged in discourses of cosmopolitanism”. Private degree students engage with multiple kinds of learning practices from the space of transnational education, within their respective curriculums, to invoke forms of trans-local and trans-cultural connections that reconstitute them as global learners. Through their

educational content and activities, not only are students' identities scaled "upwards" to become global, but they are also scaled "outwards" as they learn to appreciate cultural diversity and their place in the global world. The students' narratives and practices begin to shift our appreciation for cosmopolitanisms away from the state-led version (i.e. the hypermobile educated elite) and towards their emergence through the everyday texture of social interactions. We also see how cosmopolitanisms may, or may not, escape some of the normative underpinnings depending on the specific situations in which they emerge.

***"Unanticipated" cosmopolitan sensibilities***

If we accept that cosmopolitanisms are cultural repertoires, rather than (pre)dispositions that are either held or not held by individuals, then new relations to the world and sensibilities of "openness" can emerge. This section considers some ways in which students produce cosmopolitan sensibilities that are unanticipated by western-centric and corporatist framings of the cosmopolitan subject. They do so by attaching value to forms of worldliness that are different from those pedalled by powerful institutions

The idea of cosmopolitanism as rooted in a sense of the global all too often privileges the western modernity, framing conventional forms of cosmopolitan identities and sensibilities through the lens of the "west". As Kang (2012) argues, cosmopolitanisms can be made in and through the image of the "Asian global", whereby the everyday issues related to global connections, encounters with difference, and diversity are fashioned by "global-yet-Asian" agendas. Elson's (introduced at the beginning of this article) intimation that "we also have a lot of international students in our campus, just that mostly are Asians" provides one way of instantiating this notion of the "global-yet-Asian". From this perspective, private degree students are not only engaging with and learning about cosmopolitanisms from the space of

transnational education, which arguably confines students' imagination of the "global" to "western" forms of capital, ideas and images. Elson elaborated later in that conversation,

We have students from Thailand, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, where else? I have seen a few *angmohs* ("westerners") but not many. But *ya*, our international students are mainly Asians but that doesn't mean we are less international. Maybe we don't really hang out or mix with them, but they actually add vibrancy to the campus quite a bit, like they have cultural performances and other activities.

For Elson, the campus in and of itself is a "global" space even if this is against a backdrop of mainly Asian nationalities. It is also interesting to note the way in which Elson took care in identifying the various Asian nationalities so as to showcase its diversity on the one hand, while casually lumping the "westerners" into a single category. While he admitted there are limited interactions across these nationalities, he nevertheless acknowledged their contributions in transforming the campus into a more vibrant and diverse space. This to me is an expression of willingness to interpret and appreciate cultural difference and globalisation for its non-western particularities, and hence constitutes the banal cosmopolitan sensibility that pushes away from its normative underpinnings.

Private degree students also redefine cosmopolitanism by bringing in some "unexpected" forms of localised cultural competencies to help them navigate difference. The first kind of competency is cultivated through students' own "insider" knowledge about Singapore as an inhabitant of the city. Some of the students with whom I spoke were or have been part of the orientation programmes to assist fresh international students to settle down in Singapore. One such student is Jack. He told me, "I enjoy making friends with international students, showing them around the island, telling them where to find nice Singapore food, the history of say Singapore River. It's a good ice breaker for me and the students." As an orientation leader volunteer for two concurrent years, Jack drew on his "insider" knowledge about the urban fabric of Singapore, including local foods and places, to help "break ice" between the

international students and him. In a way, he is transforming those international students into cosmopolitan subjects as they too learn about Singapore as a culturally different place.

The second kind of cultural competency that some students have derived from the “local” is in the form of “street-smartness”. This differs from Jack’s use of “insider” knowledge in that being “street-smart” entails an element of immersion in local networks that goes beyond simply knowing about places. Instead, it is about the ability to navigate the city as an urban dweller and cultivate relationships with local actors (Woronov 2011). A student called Tai, who went to a vocational college, but later on took up a diploma course at a polytechnic, and now paying his own way through the degree education at the institute, is an exemplary embodiment of this kind of cosmopolitanism. He told me,

After ITE (vocational school), I took up a job and worked for two years. Then I went to polytechnic to do a diploma in technical engineering. After that, my boss encouraged me to do a degree. He’s a very nice guy, I still work for him up till now. I’m the sort of person who learn about the world by “venturing around and toughing it out”.<sup>1</sup> I’m not very good at studying, but I find my own ways around, maybe I take a longer time, but I still get here.

Tai described himself as a resourceful young man who espouses a rugged form of masculine attitude towards life. This, however, is not the same “rugged masculinity” that underpins the neoliberal rhetoric of individualist ethic, but stresses the skill to build inter-dependent relationships. He takes the “local” as his “world”, prides himself as a vagabond who navigates the local space, ventures around to build local contacts, and learn to overcome obstacles by toughing it out. In doing so, he continues to expand his sense of “worldliness”. This self-forged subjectivity of “worldliness” is also reminiscent of the one that is espoused by middle-class male students in Jeffrey’s (2008) work, which may indicate a degree of “masculine resourcefulness” key to such cosmopolitan imagination. Nevertheless, this deeply localised and immersed form of cosmopolitan is perhaps the most

“unanticipated” and “antithetical” to the Singaporean state-led strategic cosmopolitan, who is cushioned by elitist cultural capital, a dense network of global contacts, and a mobile lifestyle that can take them to any part of the globe.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, I have used the case study of private degree students in the globalising city-state of Singapore to explore everyday practices of cosmopolitanisms. The goal has been to examine and read for how students enact cosmopolitan practices and sensibilities beyond a narrowly construed notion of cultural and social capital in spaces of international/transnational education. I have conceptualised cosmopolitanism as a set of cultural repertoires and performances that students engage with to address everyday issues related to global-ness, difference, and diversity. Specifically, I proposed that cosmopolitanism can be potentially theorised as locally enacted spatialities that lead to different forms of openness. By doing so, I have shown that educated non-elite young people perform various forms of cosmopolitan citizenships that confound dominant elitist, western-centric, and corporatist framings of cosmopolitan openness. In exploring these actually existing variants of cosmopolitanism (Robbins 1998), this article makes two contributions to extant literature on the formation of cosmopolitan subjects in globalising spaces of higher education.

It builds upon and extends a well-charted literature around the Singaporean state project of “cosmopolising” the city-state and its variegated contestations “from below”, by refocusing “attention away from state-led or business-oriented discourses and projects... and instead foreground the tenor and texture of human encounters in the contact zones of everyday life” (Yeoh 2013, 98). I have offered three conceptual themes to analyse cosmopolitan performances within such contact zones in the educational context. First, I drew on the

notion of rooted cosmopolitanism to discuss the manner in which global orientations are constructed as viable realities that co-exist with distinctively localised aspirations. Second, I explored how students reconstitute themselves as cosmopolitan by invoking trans-local connectivities while developing a “global sense of place” through the process of cosmopolitan learnings. Finally, I used the term unanticipated cosmopolitanisms to draw attention to those emerging cosmopolitan subjectivities that do not cohere or may even be antithetical to state-vaunted, capital-driven, or western-centric constructions. These distinctive modes of cosmopolitan performances are not limited to youth practices and educational contexts, but can also serve as analytical themes across a greater range of subjects and spaces. Rooted, learning, and unanticipated cosmopolitanisms thus provide analytic themes to generate comparative insights into how cosmopolitan imaginations and practices emerge in diverse contexts.

My account also critically intervenes in the tendency for scholars to reproduce the (Asian) middle-class educated subject in the image of an internationally mobile, globe-seeking, privileged individual whose desires are attached to global capital “out there” (Ong 1999; Abelmann, Park and Kim 2009; Kim 2011; Yoon 2014). Instead, I purposively draw attention to the spatial practices of those middle-class educated young people who cannot be straightforwardly understood as cosmopolitan elites. At the same time, these young people do not fit neatly into the theoretical framings constructed through the experiences of working-class and subaltern groups. Woodman (2013) has argued that instead of depending on typologies that neatly categorise young people and their practices, researchers need to think of ways to “trace the different tensions that pull young people in different directions and which they must negotiate”. To this end, cosmopolitanism needs to be understood through a practice-oriented approach, focusing on ordinary and subtle performances through which different styles of global-local identifications, worldly inhabitations, and

ethical response to difference and diversity are produced. My case study also points to a need to move beyond binaristic understandings of “elite” versus “subaltern” cosmopolitanisms to explore the manner in which different groups of “middling” subjects construct themselves as cosmopolitan.

Additionally, this article also offers an initial engagement with Madge, Raghuram and Noxolo’s (2014) argument that scholars studying educational mobilities could move beyond viewing students in terms of their cultural capital and social reproduction of class and (dis)advantage towards a consideration for the spatial practices of knowledge production. To this end, students inhabiting the social field of international/transnational education are reconceptualised as agents who construct multiple geographical imaginaries around education and learning. And in doing so, I have shown that students who are positioned ambivalently in relation to educational capital can produce visions that do not cohere with powerful neoliberal ideas, which reveal a more decentred understanding of ideas such as “international”, “global”, and in this case, “cosmopolitanism”.

## Note

1. Original Chinese phrase used in conversation was *chuangdang jianghu* (闯荡江湖).

## References

- Abelmann, N., S. J. Park, and H. Kim. 2009. College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10 (2):229–247.
- Amin, A. 2006. The good city. *Urban Studies* 43 (5-6): 1009-1023.
- Appiah, K. A. 1997. Cosmopolitan patriots. *Critical Inquiry* 23 (3): 617–639.
- Beaverstock, J. V. 2002. Transnational elites in global cities: British expatriates in Singapore’s financial district. *Geoforum* 33 (4):525-538.

- Binnie, J., J. J. Holloway, S. Millington, and C. Young. 2009. Cosmopolitanism. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. R. Kitchin and N. Thrift, 307–313. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Bishop, P. 2011. Eating in the contact zone: Singapore foodscape and cosmopolitan timespace. *Continuum* 25 (5):637-652.
- Brown, P., and S. Tannock. 2009. Education, meritocracy and the global war for talent. *Journal of Education Policy* 24 (4):377–392.
- Cairns, D., K. Growiec, and N. A. Alves. 2014. Another “missing middle”? the marginalised majority of tertiary-educated youth in Portugal during the economic crisis. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (8):1046-1060.
- Chen, M. Z. 2014. Constructions of cosmopolitanism in teenage citizenship in Singapore. *Children’s Geographies* 13 (5):537-555.
- Cheng, Y. 2014. Time protagonists: student migrants, practices of time, and cultural construction of the Singapore-educated person. *Social & Cultural Geography* 15 (4):385–405.
- Chong, T. 2014. Vocational education in Singapore: meritocracy and hidden narratives. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35 (5):637-648.
- Farrer, J., and A. Greenspan. 2015. Raising cosmopolitans : localised educational strategies of international families in Shanghai. *Global Networks* 15 (2):141–160.
- Gidwani, V. K. 2006. Subaltern Cosmopolitanism as politics. *Antipode* 38 (1):7–21.
- Harvey, D. 2000. Cosmopolitanism and the banality of geographical evils. *Public Culture* 12 (2): 529-564.
- Ho, E. L. E. 2011. Identity politics and cultural asymmetries: Singaporean transmigrants “fashioning” cosmopolitanism. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (5):729–746.
- . 2006. Negotiating belonging and perceptions of citizenship in a transnational world: Singapore, a cosmopolis? *Social & Cultural Geography* 7 (3):385–401.
- Huang, S., and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2011. Navigating the terrains of transnational education: children of Chinese “study mothers” in Singapore. *Geoforum* 42 (3):394–403.
- Igarashi, H., and H. Saito. 2014. Cosmopolitanism as cultural capital: exploring the intersection of globalization, education and stratification. *Cultural Sociology* 8 (3):222–239.
- Jeffrey, C. 2008. Kicking away the ladder: student politics and the making of an Indian middle class. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (3):517–536.

- Jeffrey, C., and C. McFarlane. 2008. Performing cosmopolitanism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (3):420–427.
- Kang, Y. 2012. Singlish or globish: multiple language ideologies and global identities among Korean educational migrants in Singapore. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 16 (2):165–183.
- Kim, J. 2011. Aspiration for global cultural capital in the stratified realm of global higher education: why do Korean students go to US graduate schools? *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32 (1):109–126.
- Kothari, U. 2008. Global peddlers and local networks: migrant cosmopolitanisms. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (3):500–516.
- Madge, C., P. Raghuram, and P. Noxolo. 2014. Conceptualizing international education: from international student to international study. *Progress in Human Geography* Advanced online publication: <http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0309132514526442>.
- Matthews, J., and R. Sidhu. 2005. Desperately seeking the global subject: international education, citizenship and cosmopolitanism. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 3 (1):49–66.
- Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London: Routledge.
- . 1997. A global sense of place. In *Reading Human Geography*, eds. T. Barnes and D. Gregory, 315–323, London: Arnold.
- Mitchell, K. 2003. Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (4):387–403.
- Olds, K. 2007. Global assemblage: Singapore, foreign universities, and the construction of a “global education hub.” *World Development* 35 (6):959–975.
- Ong, A. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Poon, A. 2013. Common ground, multiple claims: representing and constructing Singapore’s “heartland.” *Asian Studies Review* 37 (4):559–576.
- Rizvi, F. 2007. Postcolonialism and globalization in education. *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies* 7 (3):256–263.
- Robbins, B. 1998. Actually existing cosmopolitanism. In *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. B. Robbins and P. Cheah, 1–19, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Roberts, K. 2013. Education to work transitions: how the old middle went missing and why the new middle remains elusive. *Sociological Research Online* 18. Available: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/1/3.html> [Accessed on 12 September 2015]
- Sidhu, R., K. C. Ho, and B. Yeoh. 2011. Emerging education hubs: the case of Singapore. *Higher Education* 61 (1):23–40.
- Skrbis, Z., and I. Woodward. 2007. The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness. *Sociological Review* 55 (4):730–747.
- Teo, S. 2014. Political tool or quality experience? Urban livability and the Singaporean state's global city aspirations. *Urban Geography* 35 (6):916–937.
- TodayOnline. 2014. *More than 60% of youth have considered moving abroad: survey*. Available: <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/60-singapore-youth> [Accessed on 9 September 2015]
- Waring, P. 2013. Singapore's global schoolhouse strategy: retreat or recalibration? *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (5):874–884.
- Waters, J. L. 2009. Cultural capital. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. R. Kitchen and N. Thrift, 404–406, Oxford: Elsevier.
- . 2008. *Education, Migration and Cultural Capital in the Chinese Diaspora: Transnational Students between Hong Kong and Canada*. New York: Cambria Press.
- Waters, J., and M. Leung. 2014. “These are not the best students”: continuing education, transnationalisation and Hong Kong's young adult “educational non-elite.” *Children's Geographies* 12 (1):56–69.
- . 2013. A colourful university life? Transnational higher education and the spatial dimensions of institutional social capital in Hong Kong. *Population, Space and Place* 19 (2):155–167.
- Woodman, D. 2013. Researching “ordinary” young people in a changing world: the sociology of generations and the “missing middle” in youth research. *Sociological Research Online* 18. Available: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/1/7.html> [Accessed on 25 August 2015]
- Woronov, T. E. 2011. Learning to serve: urban youth, vocational schools and new class formations in China. *The China Journal* 66:77–99.
- Xiang, B., and W. Shen. 2009. International student migration and social stratification in China. *International Journal of Educational Development* 29 (5):513–522
- Ye, J., and P. F. Kelly. 2011. Cosmopolitanism at work: labour market exclusion in Singapore's financial sector. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (5):691–707.

- Ye, R., and E. Nylander. 2015. The transnational track: state sponsorship and Singapore's Oxbridge elite. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (1):11–33.
- Yeoh, B. S. A. 2013. “Upwards” or “sideways” cosmopolitanism? Talent/labour/marriage migrations in the globalising city-state of Singapore. *Migration Studies* 1 (1):96–116.
- . 2004. Cosmopolitanism and its exclusions in Singapore. *Urban Studies* 41 (12): 2431-2445.
- Yeoh, B. S. A, and M. A. Soco. 2014. The cosmopolis and the migrant domestic worker. *Cultural Geographies* 21 (2):171–187.
- Yoon, K. 2014. Transnational youth mobility in the neoliberal economy of experience. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (8):1014–1028.
- Ziguras, C., and S. Law. 2006. Recruiting international students as skilled migrants: the global “skills race” as viewed from Australia and Malaysia. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4 (1):59–76.

## Conclusion

### Preamble

This research set out to explore the neoliberal production of middle-class citizenship through the lens of educated non-elite local youth in Singapore. Drawing on a single ethnographic case of Singaporean young people studying at a local private institute of higher education, I explored how this segment of young people are constituted and reconstituting themselves as citizen-subjects in the contemporary global economy. In my survey of literature, I have shown that dominant arguments about the political economy of higher educational restructuring and youth citizenship have tended to emphasise neoliberalism's pervasive effects on educational spaces and subjects. These effects include, for instance, the production of a form of marketised citizenship centred on competition and individualism as well as the cultivation of a future-oriented subjecthood based on elitist, middle-class norms. Furthermore, student practices in higher education are often described as being informed by neoliberal discourses that encourage the formation of an accumulative and strategic subject, whose aim is to maximise cultural profits for future economic gains. In these writings, students were mainly learning to accumulate capital and to prepare themselves as worker-citizens, and often in ways that reproduce pernicious power structures.

Although many of these studies, especially those that are informed by ethnographic approaches, have provided valuable insights into the variegated and multiplex nature of neoliberal citizenship production, several vital queries remain under-examined. My ethnographic study sought to answer some of these queries as framed in the following key research questions:

1. How are educated non-elite youth using neoliberal discourses to reproduce themselves as middle-class gendered citizens? To what extent are these discourses reproduced in a manner that endorses dominant state pedagogies?
2. To what extent has neoliberal economic restructuring precipitated among students in higher education an ethos of competitive individualism on the one hand, and inhibited social actions and interdependencies on the other hand?
3. To what extent do students learn outside dominant cultures of accumulation and human capital formation? Are there forms of learning that can be considered progressive rather than reproductive?

**Synthesis: reading across countercurrents**

The key research materials have been written into four papers, with each of them focused on discussing a particular form of subjective countercurrent produced by student narratives and practices. Each paper provides a nuanced reading of young people's use of education, their political agency, and normative evaluations within the Singaporean neoliberalising state and educational regimes. Taken together, they provide a critique of contemporary neoliberal cultural formations in the realm of education and youth. The analyses were detailed in the respective papers: *Biopolitical geographies of student life: private higher education and citizenship life-making in Singapore* (Chapter 4), *Learning in neoliberal times: private degree students and the politics of value (trans)coding in Singapore* (Chapter 5), *Critical geographies of education beyond value: moral sentiments, caring, and a politics for acting differently* (Chapter 6), and *Educated non-elites and locally enacted cosmopolitanisms: private degree students in globalising Singapore* (Chapter 7). In this

section, I synthesise findings and analyses across these papers to answer the study's research questions.

***Reproducing middle-class citizenship: educated non-elite strategies***

My first question was concerned with how educated non-elite youth engage with neoliberal discourses to perform middle-class gendered citizenship, and the extent to which these discourses are reproduced in the interest of dominant state pedagogies.

Young men and women in my research weave dominant neoliberal discourses into their narratives and strategies to perform middle-class citizenship. This reflects observations made in the wider literature about young people's use of neoliberal constructs, such as flexibility, self-mastery, and autonomy, to fashion themselves into idealised versions of middle-class citizen-subjects (Davidson 2008; Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009; Urciuoli 2010). My study has underlined the manner in which such discourses are deeply embedded within the Singaporean state's citizenship regime and reproduced through the realm of formal education and learning. I have demonstrated that young men and women's performances of citizenship are governed by a biopolitical regime that cuts across education, work, and family life (Chapter 4). In order to carve out a classed and gendered viable life in the city-state, young people envision and make use of educational capital in ways that echo state-endorsed constructs of the self-motivated, practical, and far-sighted worker-consumer citizens. To this end, I have argued that youth practices around accumulation of educational capital need to be understood as part of citizenship life-making, which is informed by state biopolitics to manage certain forms of life as orthodox and viable. In Chapter 5, I have underscored an emerging social message on self-activated learning that encourages Singaporean citizens to embrace a model of human capital based on individual development and actualisation in a volatile economic world. I showed that students draw on these ideas

to inform their strategies to become employable subjects, specifically through the cultivation of embodied, personalised capitals that would match their respective future career fields. I also pointed out, in Chapter 7, how students frame themselves as cosmopolitan subjects in ways that partially reproduce a dominant image of the state-vaunted strategic and global subject.

Even when students reproduce neoliberal discourses, they do not do so blindly or in a manner that always endorses dominant state pedagogies and interests. Students reflect on their non-elite positions in the globalising city-state's hierarchical educational regime to produce narratives and practices that (begin to) alter and contest some of these discourses. In Chapter 4, I showed that students articulate critical commentaries on the state ideology of meritocracy by questioning the idea of equal access to job opportunities. I also emphasised how students express optimistic and hopeful views in a way that incorporates evaluative and critical reflections, rather than a straightforward reprise of neoliberal optimism and hope (see Anderson and Fenton 2008; Berlant 2010). In Chapter 5, I proposed that the students inhabit a particular set of material relations that simultaneously subject them to both middle-class aspirational norms as well as non-elite sentiments that are defensive and against misrecognition. They blend ideas of adaptability and resilience into their vision of an employable subject with anti-elitist talk about intellectual bookworms and rich but lazy skivers. While students engage in an ostensibly middle-class educational pursuit, their strategies of accumulation are aimed at preserving a measure of person worth and preventing moral denigration. I have argued that such (trans)coding of value assignment points to the multidirectional and translational manner in which neoliberal discourses are reproduced. My research also presented ethnographic vignettes that reveal counterintuitive performances around care and cosmopolitanism that go against the grain of dominant constructs of the neoliberal subject (Chapters 6 and 7). In particular, I showed a range of

non-elite cosmopolitan imaginings and subjectivities that do not cohere with the Singaporean state's narrow and corporatist style of cosmopolitanism (Chapter 7). I underscored the ways in which students develop localised versions of cultural competencies in the form of insider-local knowledge and street-smartness to perform a different kind of worldliness. While students' performances of openness continue to be framed by ideas of competitiveness, rely on consumption and participation in the market, and somehow enable the students to prepare themselves for neoliberal citizenship, these localised cosmopolitan visions also deviate, and in some cases contrast to, the state-valorised cosmopolitan subject that is cushioned by elitist cultural and social capital.

Scholars on contemporary politics of middle-class citizenship in (higher) education are justified in arguing that neoliberal discourses about subjectivity have apprehended young people's personal conduct and aspirations. However, it appears that this argument has become somewhat taken for granted as opposed to being evaluated for how these technologies of subjectivity are actually played out in concrete cases. Based on my research, students absorb and push away from dominant state pedagogies in ways that can challenge powerful ideas and generate different ways of conducting the self, rather than soullessly reproducing overbearing discourses of neoliberalism. Although self-governing discourses of human capital are informing students' narratives and strategies around middle-class reproduction, their penetrations are always partial and interrupted by creative forms of practices (Willis 1977). Interestingly, some of these cultural practices and reflexivities tend to emerge from the young people's contradictory experiences of their structured position within the prevailing educational hierarchy. For instance, students produce a somewhat non-elite culture through their shared sense of marginality, anti-elitist sentiments, and ambivalent relationship with educational capital that shapes the ways they engage with state-disseminated ideas. Therefore, practices of educated non-elite youth can only be fully

appreciated when terms such as middle-class reproduction and strategic accumulation are examined in relation to emergent forms of class cultures. As I have demonstrated, these provisional suspensions are important for they allow a clearer view of how non-elite youth reproduce themselves as middle-class citizens who benefit from and subvert neoliberal discourses at the same time.

*Neoliberal youth agency: individualised or social?*

My second question was interested in whether neoliberal economic restructuring has indeed precipitated among students in higher education an ethos of competitive individualism while eroding social forms of commitments and actions.

Students are embroiled in an individualised form of struggle to stay ahead of one another in a highly competitive educational system, graduate labour market, and the wider social environment. Young people in my research are drawn into an intensified form of educational investment, which requires them actively to compete for cultural capital in order to secure positional advantage in the globalising labour market. This situation resonates with writings in contemporary literature about increased pressures for middle-class youth to enter competition for good credentials and other forms of cultural capital, including development of personal qualities and skills, in order to cope with the demands of economic change (Brown and Tannock 2009; Borovoy 2010; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). I have pointed to the Singaporean state's emphasis for citizens to remain economically competitive, constantly upgrade individual knowledge and skills, as well as to achieve self-mastery (Chapters 4 and 5). I demonstrated how students draw on these ideas to re-code their value as future worker-citizens, by cultivating professional dispositions and amplifying personal strengths to distinguish themselves as unique individuals (Chapter 5). Similar strategic efforts are found in the way some students scaled up their identities as

global learners in order to market themselves to future employers (Chapter 7). Across these accounts, students also emphasised how they need to improve their market worth given that private degree education suffers from being under-valued by employers, especially in the public sector. Student performances of competitive individualism, however, are not always singularly directed at securing economic positions. For instance, I have shown that young female students compete for educational capital as part of their gendered practices to become self-sufficient and individual risk-managing twenty-first century women (Chapter 4).

But perhaps more strikingly than an ethos of competition and individualism, students engage in vibrant forms of bonding, collective commitments, and cultivation of interdependencies in the space of the campus. These young people enact different kinds of interpersonal relationships that allow them to endure and mobilise against pernicious structures and social misrecognitions. I offered a glimpse into how students hang together through social media to perform a modest version of activism to defend private degree education, indicating one way in which young people express non-individualised political agency (Chapter 4). These students also demonstrate a measure of collective commitments, although not in an overt manner, through developing a lay understanding of what is just or unjust based on their shared experiences. I showed how this collectivism is channelled into ugly stories and feelings about bookworms and skivers as part of their defensiveness against bad reputation and belittlement (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 provided a substantive discussion of social agency and interdependencies among students through the analytic lens of care, which is against the grain of claims that competitive individualism has captured students' imagination of education and learning. To this end, I underscored the centrality of friendship solidarities among students, where they perform care and mutual support for each other under the lack of formal educational resources. Importantly, I argued that

expressions of care in the forms of unconditional empathy and gift of attention, especially those that emerge from everyday moral reasoning about what is right or wrong, cannot be accounted for by neoliberal logics of individual responsibility and self-interested investment. While many of these collective actions and social bonds are produced through small acts and gestures of lay ethical commitments, such flickering moments illuminate how students can act in ways that exceed the image of an individualised citizen-subject. Yet, social bonds and caring relationships may also act as the basis for the reproduction of competitive neoliberalism, given that such social interdependencies often emerge as strategies to lubricate and help students cope with educational hierarchicalisation and cut-throat competition.

Several critics have claimed that neoliberal restructuring of higher education has promoted a culture of competition and atomisation, and where the only interpersonal relationships are those that operate through a competition for capital (Davies and Bansel 2007; Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon 2007). My research with young people suggests that social forms of commitments and actions are still possible even when the effects of neoliberal restructuring are pressing down hard on students to compete in an individualistic manner. Although Singapore Private Institute's exceptional focus on promoting workforce readiness and industry-relevant pedagogies reproduces a market-oriented rhetoric of higher education, students do not behave and conduct themselves accordingly to the kinds of market values that critics caution about. Counterintuitive to this imagination of the so-called neoliberal campus, young people in my research engage in various non-individualised forms of interpersonal relationships. Interdependent relationships between students are not the result of self-interested pursuits or competition for capital. Rather, they emerge from relations of care, love, and intimacy that are produced from a diverse range of moral and ethical sensibilities, such as that of spirituality and faith, or in situations of loss and alienation. This

social nature of young people's agency offers a challenge to scholarly accounts that overly emphasise the individualisation of youth strategies and acts of resistance under neoliberal governmentality (see Jeffrey 2011). In order to enrich our understanding of neoliberal youth agency, more research is needed on how young people's capacity to resist and cope with dominant structures is mediated through social relationships in both provisional and enduring ways.

***Learning and cultural production: reproductive or progressive?***

My third question sought to explore the extent to which students learn outside cultures of accumulation and human capital formation, and whether some of these learning practices can be considered progressive rather than reproductive.

In my research, students commonly engage with learning in a manner that is informed by dominant cultures of accumulation and human capital formation. They display a remarkable willingness to take responsibility for their own learning, mainly as a way to develop themselves as human capital. Under the Singaporean state biopolitics of human capital, this ethos of learning has become deeply engrained into the psyche of ordinary citizens (Chapters 4 and 5). For many students, learning to assemble the best combination of cultural and social capital to advance individual career progression has become a commonsense activity. This is, however, not to romanticise young people's optimistic and enterprising spirits around learning. Their learning experiences as private degree students are haunted by recollections of personal failures as well as prevailing stereotypes of a rusted reputation that sticks to both the institute and their bodies. The burden of self-development weighs down heavily on these students, leading them to produce feelings of frustration, injustice, or even loss with regard to how else they might act apart from pressing on in the rat race. These observations about students' learning practices echo with existing writings

about how the contemporary learning ethic is increasingly framed by a neoliberal logic of self-development for value-accrual (see Gerrard 2014). But in many situations, students engage with learning in ways that do not respond to the demands of labour relations and capitalist culture. Neither do they learn in a manner that is always directed at self-renewal with an eye for maximising exchange-value.

I have pointed out in Chapter 4 that some students push away from a neoliberal framing of learning by generating alternative definitions of education. These students argue that the concept of learning has to be valued, first and foremost, for its non-instrumental benefits rather than being narrowly focused on accumulation of credentials or job preparation. I also pointed to how young men and women learn and make use of educational capital that can redefine respectable forms of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, students produce a learning culture that blends neoliberal ideas of work-readiness and self-development with moral discourses that allow them to maintain a degree of worth and dignity (Chapter 5). I argued that these young people do not only learn for the sake of boosting employability as if their normative goals are only ever about becoming worker-consumer citizens. They also introduce different kinds of pedagogies, skills and knowledges that they consider to be valuable to reconstitute themselves as learning subjects. In the process, they produce and maintain their own regime of value meanings that are based on classed understandings of competence, merit, and respect. In Chapter 6, I demonstrated how students produce diverse learning subjectivities and spaces on the campus. I argued that ordinary relationships among friends and peers provided opportunities for students to learn about the importance of care and intimacy, as well as to reflect on relations of social difference and responsibility towards others. Students also learn about difference, diversity, and ethics through both formal and informal curricula through imagining their campus as a transnational or global space (Chapter 7). I showed that they can cultivate a form of cosmopolitan citizenship that

is not narrowly directed towards value-accrual, and in a way that problematises the dominant view of cosmopolitanism as a strategic cultural and social capital in extant writings about contemporary youth's pursuit of international/transnational education (e.g. Matthews and Sidhu 2005; Kim 2011; Farrer and Greenspan 2015).

Based on my research, students' learning practices are diverse and multidirectional. They do not learn to become proper citizen-subjects based on state-promoted cultures of accumulation and human capital formation in a rigid manner. Even as they learn under immense pressures to accrue value through investment in credentials and in embodied qualities, they do so by combining emotional, moral, and ethical concerns. The breadth of learning subjectivities that emerge from these reworkings cannot be encompassed by watertight notions of neoliberal accumulation and subject formation. This is in part because students do not simply learn from state pedagogies or narrowly construed formal curriculum, but a range of spaces that provide them with alternative sources of norms and values to act upon – what Barnett (2012, 384) calls the “spaces of practical reasoning”. Furthermore, students' learning practices are more vibrant and dynamic than what has been openly acknowledged in writings about neoliberal subjectivities within higher education. Students learn in ways that may lead to a somewhat politically progressive kind of cultural production, such as an ethic of care and solidarity and cosmopolitan openness. Without losing sight of the enduring forms of power structures that continue to shape learning experiences, I suggest that more attention needs to be given to the transformative work of learning. As I have demonstrated, learning practices are perhaps best understood as both reproductive and progressive. But as we begin to appreciate better how education and learning are being pulled into neoliberal projects, new questions around the radical potential of learning is also ripe for critical examination.

### **Contributions of research**

The research makes two key interventions in geographical and social scientific writings about neoliberal restructuring of higher education and its implications for youth citizenship.

First, my study has provided an ethnographically-sensitive account of youth practices that disputes the idea of a ubiquitous logic of neoliberalism and its hollowing out effect on the citizen-subject (c.f. Brown 2015). It cautions against a straightforward claim that neoliberal technologies of control have extended market values into citizenship subjectivity and, with it, the erosion of progressive political projects (Shumar 1997; Mitchell 2003; Giroux 2003; Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon 2007; Gerrard 2014). I am not, however, setting up an apologetic defence or benevolent view of neoliberalism. Rather, my position is a modest but critical take on how people are more or less able to harness neoliberal technologies and their contradictions for different ways of thinking and doing, including those everyday mobilisation and production of narratives and practices that seek to contest or rework dominant power structures.. Such an approach resonates with recent advances made by geographers to read for counterintuitive and experimental modes of young lives that may (or may not) exceed hegemonic forms of neoliberal cultural formations (Jeffrey 2010; Kraftl 2015).

Second, my research has provided a much-needed analysis of middle-class citizenship formation in non-elite educational spaces within neoliberal globalisation of higher education. Studies on middle-class strategies have tended to focus on youth narratives and practices of those who occupy a relatively advantageous and privileged position in the global competition for educational capital (Ball 2003; Davidson 2008; Liu 2008; Waters 2008; Kim 2011; Cheng 2014). Accounts of educated non-elite youth who are squeezed out of internationalising education systems provide insights that complicate clear-cut ideas

about middle-class strategies, values, and cosmopolitan aspirations. In addition to a critical examination of how social inequalities and disadvantages are reproduced within neoliberal reconfigurations of higher education (Waters 2006; see also Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014), emphasis also needs to be given to fine-grained analyses of cultural invention among young people caught at the losing end of a diversifying educational landscape. Theoretical perspectives on class cultures and cultural production continue to have enduring relevance for an intellectual project like this (c.f. Willis 1981, Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996).

Additionally, the contributions of my research have been written across the four papers to address specific gaps within scholarship on geographies of higher education and youth. These are as follows:

In the first paper, I proposed a greater consideration for the role of gendered and classed biopolitics in critical analyses of student life in higher education. I also engaged with the recent call to search for biopolitical alternatives in educational spaces and cautioned against a purist notion of alternative biopolitics. Instead, I offered the concepts of pulling and pushing to frame the paradoxical nature of students' engagement with biopolitics (see Chapter 4).

In the second paper, I argued that the actual production of neoliberal subjectivities in education spaces can benefit from an analysis of young people's practices of value (trans)coding. I suggested that the concept of value provides a new language, which is yet to be registered in extant geographical writings, to investigate the classed biopolitics of human capital formation in a way that is sensitive to diverse value meanings and practices (see Chapter 5).

In the third paper, I presented a critical analysis of student geographies that pays attention to lay normativity, specifically on how students draw on ordinary moral and ethical sentiments to enact caring relations within the campus. My account contested widespread claims about the erosion of caring ethos in higher education, and contributed to nascent efforts within geographies of education to read for relations of care and intimacy (see Chapter 6).

In the fourth paper, I proposed for cosmopolitanism to be theorised as locally enacted spatialities. Non-elite youth perform localised forms of openness that provide a challenge to the dominant framing of cosmopolitanism as an elite cultural capital/disposition. Therefore, a more expansive notion of cosmopolitanism is needed to eschew its elitist, western-centric, and corporatist conception in writings about transnational/global education (see Chapter 7).

### **Limitations and potentials**

It is instructive to note that my research has relied on a single private educational institute as the primary locus of my ethnographic case study, and therefore the findings are not generalisable to other institutes within the private educational sector. Although I mobilised the term private degree students in the study, it is used as a heuristic device to begin to identify some parallel sets of experiences among these young people. For instance, their ambivalent relationship to educational capital and subjection to negative stereotypes are somewhat unique to structural configuration of private higher education within Singapore. But instead of striving for a generalisable account of young people's fates and fortunes in the private educational sector, my study was more interested in exploring how their experiences can help inform broader theoretical constructs around middle-class citizenship, youth agency, and neoliberalism. Additionally, my case study has provided some initial thematic cues for further research into the complex student geographies of a burgeoning private higher education landscape in Singapore and beyond.

The case study's contribution to the overall research objective of exploring middle-class citizenship production among so-called educated non-elite youth is necessarily partial. Private degree students constitute only one cohort of Singaporean young people who can be considered educated non-elite. Students in other educational institutions, such as that of vocational training institutes, can also serve as a productive lens for the research. My focus on private higher education was to specifically address the lack of attention to this emerging educational landscape within extant literature on globalising higher education. Also, the term educated non-elite has been invoked in this study to describe a particular cultural formation of class subjects in Singapore: those who are educated and invest in middle-class aspirational norms but at the same time develop non-elite dispositions by virtue of their structured educational status. The extent to which young people in other geographical contexts are embroiled into similar educated non-elite positions is a potential area for further examination.

### **Concluding statement**

In spite of widespread critiques about the neoliberalisation of higher education and its production of citizenship in relation to the market, transformation of students into profit-maximising individuals, and the vitalisation of a self-enterprising subjectivity, many of these claims remain under-examined with respect to cultural production. My ethnographically sensitive account of middle-class citizenship reproduction among educated non-elite youth draws attention to performances of subjectivities that cannot be understood as categorically neoliberal. Hence, citizenship production within neoliberalising spaces of education and learning needs to be critically examined for both its classed biopolitics and culturally inventive moments; an approach that is attuned to the obdurate nature of social

reproduction as well as possibilities for recoding the neoliberal personhood in contemporary higher education.

## References

- Abelmann, N., S. J. Park, and H. Kim. 2009. College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10 (2):229–247.
- Anderson, B., and J. Fenton. 2008. Editorial introduction: spaces of hope. *Space and Culture* 11 (2):76–80.
- Ball, S. J. 2003. The risks of social reproduction : the middle class and education markets. *London Review of Education* 1 (3):63–175.
- Barnett, C. 2012. Geography and ethics: placing life in the space of reasons. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (3):379–388.
- Berlant, L. 2010. Cruel optimism. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. M. Gregg and G. Seigworth, 93–157. United States of America: Duke University Press.
- Borovoy, A. 2010. What color is your parachute ? The post-degree society. In *Social Class in Contemporary Japan: Structures, Sorting and Strategies*, eds. H. Ishida and D. Slater, 170-193, New York: Routledge.
- Brown, W. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
- Brown, P., and S. Tannock. 2009. Education, meritocracy and the global war for talent. *Journal of Education Policy* 24 (4):377–392.
- Brown, P., Lauder, H., and Ashton, D. 2011. *The Global Auction: the Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press.
- Cheng, Y. 2014. Time protagonists: student migrants, practices of time, and cultural construction of the Singapore-educated person. *Social & Cultural Geography* 15 (4):385–405.
- Davidson, E. 2008. Marketing the self: the politics of aspiration among middle-class Silicon Valley youth. *Environment and Planning A* 40 (12):2814–2830.
- Davies, B., and P. Bansel. 2007. Neoliberalism and education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20 (3):247–259.
- Farrer, J., and A. Greenspan. 2015. Raising cosmopolitans : localised educational strategies of international families in Shanghai. *Global Networks* 15 (2):141–160.

- Gerrard, J. 2014. All that is solid melts into work: self-work, the “learning ethic” and the work ethic. *The Sociological Review* 62 (4):862–879.
- Giroux, H. 2003. Youth, higher education, and the crisis of public time: educated hope and the possibility of a democratic future. *Social Identities* 9 (2):141–168.
- Jeffrey, C. 2011. Geographies of children and youth II: global youth agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2):245–253.
- Jeffrey, C. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Kim, J. 2011. Aspiration for global cultural capital in the stratified realm of global higher education: why do Korean students go to US graduate schools? *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32 (1):109–126.
- Kraftl, P. 2015. Alter-childhoods: biopolitics and childhoods in alternative education spaces. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105 (1):219–237.
- Levinson, B. A., D. C. Foley, and D. C. Holland. 1996. *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Liu, F. 2008. Constructing the autonomous middle-class self in today’s China: the case of young-adult only-children university students. *Journal of Youth Studies* 11 (2):193–212.
- Lynch, K., M. Lyons, and S. Cantillon. 2007. Breaking silence: educating citizens for love, care and solidarity. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 17 (1-2):1–19.
- Madge, C., P. Raghuram, and P. Noxolo. 2014. Conceptualizing international education: from international student to international study. *Progress in Human Geography* Advanced online publication: <http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0309132514526442>.
- Matthews, J., and R. Sidhu. 2005. Desperately seeking the global subject: international education, citizenship and cosmopolitanism. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 3 (1):49–66.
- Mitchell, K. 2003. Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (4):387–403.
- Shumar, W. 1997. *College for Sale: a Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education*. London: Falmer Press.

- Urciuoli, B. 2010. Neoliberal education: preparing students for new workplace. In *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism*, ed. C. Greenhouse, 162–176. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Waters, J. L. 2008. *Education, Migration and Cultural Capital in the Chinese Diaspora: Transnational Students between Hong Kong and Canada*. New York: Cambria Press.
- . 2006. Emergent geographies of international education and social exclusion. *Antipode* 38 (5):1046–1068.
- Willis, P. 1981. Cultural production is different from cultural reproduction is different from social reproduction is different from reproduction. *Interchange* 12 (2-3):48–67.
- . 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon House.