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Title

Citizens and/or consumers: mutations in the construction of concepts and practices of school choice

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Short bio

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Abstract

Recent research on school choice highlights the tendency among some White, middle-class parents to engage with discourses of community responsibility and ethnic diversity as part of their responsibility and duty as choosers and who therefore exercise choice in ways that undercut the individualistic and self- interested character framing governmental discourses and rationalities around choice. This article contributes to these debates through making visible the ways in which some mothers articulate and combine meanings and practices of choice that register contrasting and sometimes contradictory notions of active and responsible parenting. Drawing on data from a group of mothers of diverse social class and racial backgrounds, I explore how some mothers negotiate their school choice around a number of intersecting positions and relations that work across, as well as within, formulations of public–private, collective–individual, citizen– consumer, political–commercial. Through a consideration of the relationships in practice between these diverse elements, this article questions the analytic value of distinctions between citizen and consumer, community and individual as framings for understanding the motivations and aspirations shaping some mothers' school choices.

Keywords

Introduction

A central trend in British education policy and practice since the Conservative governments of the 1980s has been the idea that schools are more responsive, flexible and better managed when parents engage with them as consumers – discriminating, autonomous and self-directing. This reflects attempts by government to impose pressures on schools to improve their services through competing with other schools for pupils and government funds (DfEE 2001; Jones 2003; Lowe 2005). Specifically, it marks the shift in government rhetoric from a view of service users as passive recipients to active choosers (Baldock 1998; Le Grand 1997). A corollary of this is that service users are 'hailed' or guided into adjusting their actions and decisions on the basis of certain rationalities and striving for a 'maximum' position that registers preferences that are logically consistent with a kind of individual rational calculus (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994). Through treating citizens as individuated agents who pursue self-interest, however, this approach to public service reform has been criticised for undermining associations and relations that engender citizenship-based commitments to ideas of public welfarism and a democratic citizenry (Marquand 2004; Needham 2003; Reay et al. 2008).

In this article, I move beyond a narrow rational conception of the individual as an atomistic, utilitarian subject by recasting the responsibilities and activities of parents in collective as well as individualising terms. Through identifying the ways in which some mothers frame their understandings and interpretations of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting, I explore how school choice is negotiated at the intersection of positions and vocabularies that register conflicting and sometimes contradictory sensibilities around and valuations of choosing. In doing so, I demonstrate how the separation of domains of individual versus

collective, private versus public, commer- cial versus political operate as weak categories for designating and distinguishing between types of choice-making. I argue instead that these domains need to be under- stood as relationally constituted and powerfully interrelated, given the competing forms of pressure flowing from citizenship-based, consumer-oriented and parental obligations. This leads to a consideration of how competing understandings of, and claims to, 'active' parenting are subject to contrary pushes and pulls in the context of school choice. By explicating the discourses, some mothers bring to bear upon their experiences of and engagements with choice, this article explores the loose and amorphous character of categories of public and private, collective and individual, with the intention of making visible the way some mothers graft and patch together different interpretative frameworks and expressions for rationalising their school choice.

Choice and markets: 'new' trajectories in education policy

In reality, I believe people do want choice, in public services as in other services. But anyway, choice isn't an end in itself. It is one important mechanism to ensure that citizens can indeed secure good schools and health services in their communities. Choice puts the levers in the hands of parents and patients so that they as citizens and consumers can be a driving force for improvement in their public services. (Blair 2004, 1)

As the above quotation indicates, the New Labour government was committed to introducing user choice into public services, such as education and health care (see DfES 2004, 2005; DoH 2000), with the aim to transform welfare users into citizens who manage and look upon themselves as consumers of public services or 'citizen– consumers' (Clarke and Newman 2005). A crucial basis for the implementation of user choice in these areas, as well as other public services including social care (DoH 2005) and housing (DCLG 2008), was a shift away from state-coordinated attempts to manage the distribution of welfare goods, defined by a commitment to Keynesian conceptions of the social democratic welfare state, and a move towards securing market conceptions of deregulation and privatisation as mechanisms for the delivery of public services (Ball 2008; Giddens 1998; Le Grand 2007). Much of the ideological and discursive work of British government policy rhetoric around education in recent years has centred therefore around a commitment to strengthening a view of the superiority of market mechanisms over state monopolies, reflecting the multiplicity of attempts by government to transform principles, policies, discourses and practices into new configurations and assemblages (Clarke and Newman 2006). According to Ball, these shifts and ruptures in New Labour policy around education can be read as 'distinct reflections of, or developments from, the period of Thatcherism or neo- liberalism' (2008, 84). Indeed, the contexts that created the conditions of possibility for the emergence of school choice in Britain can be located in the centrality of the vocabulary of neo-classical economics and individualism that characterised 1980s Conservative government political thought and practice (Keat and Abercrombie 1991).

Choice as a governmental mechanism in education can be traced to the Black Paper of 1977, where Stuart Sexton, who later went on to become advisor to the Secretary of State in the Conservative government, laid the foundation for a new system of secondary education. A crucial element in this text was the stipulation that parents should be granted absolute freedom of school choice by application. It was not until the introduction of the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), however, that choice

became a central feature of education reform in Britain. The ERA signalled for many a decisive break from post-war social policy (Glennerster, Power, and Travers 1991) in that 'it destroyed the educational culture which had been developed between 1944 and 1979, and began the work of creating a different one, in which old "social actors" were marginalized and new ones rendered powerful' (Jones 2003, 131). Through the ERA the figure of the parent was institutionalised as a formative local force (Jones 2003), leading to closer parental involve- ment in schools. The 1980 Education Act also contributed significantly to greater parental involvement by confirming the statutory right of parents to be elected as school governors. Of particular relevance to changes in education legislation and policy during this time was thus an increased emphasis on parental choice and the role of the parent in relation to education more generally (Ranson 1993; Reay 2008). Crucial to the implementation of school choice in education, however, was a focus on reducing the weight of centralised power typically enjoyed by the Local Education Authority (LEA) at that time, with much of that power being assigned to parents as consumers of education services or schools as independent planners and managers of their own provision. The 'rolling back' of welfare state activities under the Conservative administration of the 1980s thus represented both a weakening of the local authority against the local school and a desire to reduce public, non-commercial powers, resources and excessive public spending.

Consequently, schools were permitted to 'opt out' of the locally controlled system and become grant-maintained – that is, administratively self-governing but at the same time funded in part by the central state. Budgetary responsibility was devolved to the heads and governors of individual schools, for example with allocated resources secured in part through the number of children schools attracted to their services (Jones 2003). Budget levels were thus linked to student intake and schools were encouraged to raise money from industry or charity, with the aim of ensuring that schools performed in ways that were attentive to market concepts of supply and demand. The introduction of rate-capping on provision in effect facilitated a climate of intense competition between schools, which led necessarily to a weakening of the power of the LEAs and the arrival of a marketing and managerial approach in education (Lowe 2005). Indeed, as Crozier makes clear (1997), schools became more conscious of the market and aware of the parents' 'consumer' status within it as a result of these changes in policy. As a corollary, parents and schools began to appropriate the vocabulary of economics and choice (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995), though the mode of appropriation is always unstable and unpredictable (Reay 1996). The marked continuity of Conservative political thought and practice in New Labour policy is, therefore, evident through the emphasis on the articulation of decentralised power and the use of market forms as preferred devices in the delivery of public services.

The assembly of market rationalities and imperatives in the realm of education was, therefore, further intensified through New Labour's decision to extend the scope and reach of market mechanisms in reform of public services. This was managed in part through the representation of 'old' and 'new' models of public sector organisation (Vidler and Clarke 2005), in which the 'old' system of education was represented in terms of a 'monolithic' structure – demoralising, monopolistic and uniform – with a 'focus on a basic and standard product for all' (DfES 2004, Foreword). In 'treating everyone the same', the 'old' system of education was conflated with a 'one-size-fits- all' model of provision (DfEE 2001, 15) that apparently lacked diversity of provision and thus stifled choice itself, precisely because the 'need to differentiate provision to individual aptitudes and abilities within schools often

took second place' (DfEE 2001, Introduction). In contrast, the 'new' system, with its appeals to the expectations of a consumer culture or consumer society, was represented as more equitable and flexible given it emphasis on choice and consumer voice, 'so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system' (DfES 2004, Foreword). However, since the 1944 system of education was not 'one-size-fits-all' but constituted through three categories of schooling – secondary modern, technical and grammar (Jones 2003) – New Labour might be accused of evoking an overly tidy representation of the past and therefore condensing a set of complicated education policy narratives.

The rhetorical space opened up through these assumptions aimed to strengthen claims concerning the apparent equitable status of the 'new' education system, with its emphasis on conceptions of fairness, responsiveness, flexibility and choice for all (Ball 2008). The resulting image is one of the 'old' public sector organisations as inefficient, monopolistic, uniform and elitist, as compared to the 'new' system, which is understood to operate as an equality-producing mechanism in the reform of public services. These narratives around public sector organisation highlight the importance of the discursive and political work of articulation as a necessary resource for creating the conditions of possibility through which reform can be imagined, put into practice and reworked within a neo-liberal framing of conceptions of development and progress (Clarke, Smith, and Vidler 2006). Crucially, it captures New Labour's struggle to gain ascendancy over and render uncomplicated the history of British education and points to a set of blurred, messy and contradictory narratives concerning public sector organisation.

New Labour policy texts around education, therefore, continued much of the previous Conservative governments attempts to locate parents and schools through the exchange and intersection of relations of consumers and producers (Reay 2008). Another crucial element in the ideological work of articulation noted in these texts was the notion of citizenship, which is now being redefined to accommodate more 'active' and 'responsible' notions of parenting in the realm of education. In a submission to a Public Administration Select Committee report on the case for user choice in public services, the ministers wrote: 'Whilst some have suggested that becoming better informed about the range and quality of services available is a "research cost", it is one that most people could consider a legitimate investment for effective citizenship' (Ministers of State 2004, 3.4.3). Here, 'effective' denotes a form of responsibilised, moralised agency, with a view to transforming users of welfare services from so-called passive recipients to self-regulating, discriminating agents. Furthermore, it promotes elements of the entrepreneurial ideal – 'the minimal, regulatory, decentralized, laissez-faire State' (Perkin 2002, 321) – as a basis for debates over welfare restructuring and versions of effective citizenship in Britain.

The concept and practice of user choice in public services thus comes to stand for, or stand in for, citizenship both as a status and as a form of rights to information and advice in becoming better informed. This particular model of citizenship – active citizenship – is discernible through The Citizen's Charter (HMSO 1991) in which public services were configured around a view of citizens as the bearers of consumer rights (Pollitt 1994). Specifically, it engenders a liberal or neo-liberal understanding of active citizenship, which has at its centre a view of citizens as consumers who demand goods that require public provision, and thus limits concepts of the citizen to individuals who exercise choice between

a given set of providers (Johansson and Hvinden 2005). But what types of behaviour typify the role of the consumer and how do they differ from those forms of behaviour we readily associate with the role of the citizen? According to Clarke, the role of the consumer is marked by the practice of consumption and thus the defining feature of the consumer is 'the act of purchase: commodified goods, services or experiences are the means to consummating needs, wants and desires' (2004a, 2). The kinds of actions and decisions thought to guide and inform consumer behaviour are therefore sometimes located in and through motivations and orientations defined by the act of acquisition or 'choosing' (Hauptmann 1996), where the moment of choice is understood to be essentially self-interested (Needham 2003). This explains in part the influence of new right public choice accounts of agency on the emergence and celebration of the figure of the consumer in British education policy discourse and practice. The general view held by proponents of public choice theory was that, despite working in public and non-commercial organisations, bureaucrats are rational utility maximisers who are often motivated by self-interest (Downs 1957, 1967; Niskanen 1973), making them self-interested 'knaves' rather than altruistic 'knights' (Le Grand 1997). Government attempts to construct active parents who are 'better-informed consumers' of education services (DCSF 2008, 6) are therefore understood to act as a correction to the so-called self- interested character of public officials, precisely because it forces providers to appeal to service users as discriminating agents who make decisions akin to those of market choices. In this framing, parents are conceived as 'maximisers': people 'who always seek the biggest possible benefits and the least costs in their decisions' and who are 'basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour, choosing how to act on the basis of the consequences for their personal welfare' (Dunleavy 1991, 3).

In this view, the consumer is seen to embody the market as well as identifications and practices based on commodification and securing self-interest. In contrast, the citizen is sometimes understood to symbolise an alternative set of identifications mediated by the 'public realm' – the state, for example. As Clarke observes: 'In this public realm, people as citizens fulfil their obligations to one another; engage in mutual deliberation; and collectively pursue the "public interest"' (2007, 98). In this framing, the citizen designates membership of a political community, usually the nation. The shared sense of status and solidarity, which underpins this membership, is often captured as signifying the 'decommodification' of the individual's relationship with the community (Esping-Anderson 1990). The citizen and consumer can thus be understood to embody fundamentally different relation- ships and identifications based on the principles of the market and state as divergent and opposing forms of social coordination. These distinctions, however, tend to condense very complicated meanings and practices, in effect obscuring the articulation of other figures and modes of relationship (Clarke 2007) and foreclosing any critical engagement with the practices and processes through which different rationalisations might be grafted and patched as the basis for individual action and decision-making. In what follows I highlight 'the diverse cultures or rationalities embodied in practices in consumption' (Bevir and Trentmann 2007, 186) as a way of tracking how notions of 'active' and 'responsible' behaviour are differently located and accounted for by mothers through their engagements with concepts and practices of school choice. This article therefore examines how mothers assign and combine different forms of agency in their actions as choosers, with the aim of exploring the intersecting dynamics in these variants of

agency through a consideration of the plurality of rationalities that emerge from meanings and practices of school choice.

Research

The mothers, who feature in this article, were interviewed at a time when they were being addressed ('interpellated') as consumers in the field of educational choice, and thus were being called upon to take up and put into practice a set of rationalities and strategies as part of their responsibility and duty as active, informed choosers. This article draws on data from in-depth interviews I conducted with 11 mothers of different social class and racial backgrounds living in an area of north London (Camden). If we take seriously the idea that a person's place of residence, professional occupation and income determines their social class background, then the majority of mothers featured in this article may be classified as working class (and White). These interviews formed part of a larger study in which I made use of a mixture of data consisting in the main of interviews, school brochures and websites, local and government texts, newspaper articles and government and non-government websites. The combined application of these multiple data sources allowed for a rich and complicated reading of choice as a framing, discourse and function subjects inhabit and perform. Moreover, through highlighting local contexts and associations, I was able to trace the ways in which some mothers enact multiple discursive framings simultaneously and thus sometimes move in, between and across subject positions and discourses. This forced me to rethink assumptions around class-based bifurcation often found in research around school choice (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995, 1996; Reay and Ball 1997, 1998), in which disparate and complicated voices appear to be reduced to stable moments of class articulation, even if sometimes those experiences are not articulated in straightforwardly class terms. At the same time, much of Ball's recent work around school choice centres on explaining how positions are animated and performatively reinscribed through cultural and political practices – practices of governance, for example (Ball 2004). In this way, the meaning and practice of school choice can be understood more generally as performative and behavioural sites for the exercise of class positions and relations; that is, it has the character of a network, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures and vocabularies. In this article, I want to extend this analysis by focusing on how some mothers attempt to make sense of choice through reconciling potentially contradictory trends and tendencies, or holding on to alternative frameworks of meaning and practice that work to subordinate the consumerist logics shaping it.

Hence, there was no attempt to generate representativeness in the sample, but rather a focus on deploying a critical discursive psychology that would enable me to explore the possible nuances and complexities of discursive and material representations of social class and race as framings mediating imaginaries of community and locality. All the respondents for this study were mothers, usually single with more than one child. The method used to recruit interviewees involved writing and later speaking to head teachers at local primary schools, with the aim of opening up discussions around the possibility of providing some access for the project. Through these exchanges, I explained the background to the project, the aims of the research, its ethical dimensions and how I intended to disseminate research findings. Importantly, I explained my reasons for wanting to speak to parents with children in Year 6, namely parents who at that time were being summoned to take on the role of the

consumer in the field of educational choice, and who were therefore experiencing the kind of anxiety, difficulty and strain that feeds into and is a product of choice.

My approach to the interview method was to adopt a style of interviewing and questioning that would permit a casual exchange between researcher and researched, one that would potentially elicit the most ordinary and everyday speech acts and therefore enable me to capture the messiness around positions, relations and their intersectionality. In this way, I was interested in provoking unsettled responses (responses that could rarely be contained by one discourse). Whenever a mother articulated highly generalised assumptions, for instance, I would follow this up with a series of sub-questions that tried to problematise its generalisability and provoke thinking around its contradictoriness. Here, then, I tended to proceed inductively – waiting to see what would emerge and noting its intersection with other discourses. Nearly, all the mothers who took part in this study requested to be interviewed at home, which in turn created an exchange that felt comfortable and relaxed. The setting of the home therefore complemented my approach to the interview, precisely because it guaranteed for each mother a space that felt familiar to them and thus permitted an open-ended and semi-structured style of interviewing and a more free flowing, uninhibited style of conversation.

The practice of building up common themes across the data as well as uncovering the discordances within those accounts was both systematic and time-consuming. Reading and re-reading transcripts three or four times enabled me to get a feel for the data – its pace, movement, limitations, difficulties, etc. – and to uncover themes that may have previously gone unnoticed. My analysis of the data focused on exploring how mothers engage with the meanings and practices made available through govern- mental discourses and rationalities around choice, with the aim to uncover the discur- sive practice through which these engagements are negotiated through cultural repertoires and socially circulating discourses. With this in mind, I developed an approach that was capable of uncovering some of the dynamics of choice experienced by mothers; an approach that is mindful of post-structuralist critiques of the supposed stability and homogeneity of subject positions, and one that captures the way mothers position themselves in a field of choice that is locally constructed, but which is also framed by multiple discourses formed out of different sites existing in, between and across localities.

The meaning and practice of choice is framed by a multiplicity of discourses (Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball 1994), making it a complicated and dynamic field to engage with. The discursive approach developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987; also see Wetherell and Potter 1992), with its emphasis on the plural or multiple nature of identity (Wetherell 2005), offers possibilities for affirming the capacity of individuals to exercise agency in relation to discourses, while also remaining mindful of the potentially constitutive force of discourses, making it appropriate in the context of this study. In what follows, I take up this approach to examine the ways in which some mothers successfully manage to couple different identifications (of the parent and consumer, e.g.) to create hybrid forms of identity (the citizen–consumer), and the way other mothers struggle to manage the tensions in these identifications. This forces a consideration of the analytic value of distinctions of citizen and consumer, community and individual, political and commercial as framings for understanding the motivations and orientations shaping parents' school choices.

Active, responsible parenting: collapsed distinctions and intersecting positions

A common theme to emerge across the interviews I conducted with mothers was the notion of 'active' and 'responsible' parenting. For these mothers, choosing a second- ary school for their child often involved engaging in attempts to construct meaningful representations around what it means, or should mean, to act 'responsibly' and 'reasonably' in the realm of education. This suggests the idea that representations and embodiments of 'good' and 'responsible' parenting are not lived and experienced as fixed, stable realities but instead are framings and discourses that are inhabited and performed as well as negotiated and reworked. What counts as 'good' parental choice is therefore subject to contrary pushes and pulls as mothers struggle to locate and account for their motivations and behaviour on the basis of perceived normative obligations and duties that are various and contradictory. The following extract is taken from an interview with Pauline whose son, Simon, is expected to begin secondary school at Sutton House, a local private school that specialises in offering education to children with learning difficulties:

Andrew: So you have opted out of the state system?

Pauline: Yeah I did but I'm not happy about the fact that I had to. As a person it's   my job to try and do the right thing politically as part of the larger society, just like it's the school's job to try and do the best for the whole school. As a parent, I can only worry about my own child at the end of the day. I'm not happy that I can't do both but my political beliefs and my personal beliefs should not be shoved down their throat anymore than … I don't have any problem with that … If I was running for the Labour party I think I would have some problems with it but I'd probably be fine because after all what's more important your job or your children.

The use of the noun 'job' registers elements of duty or obligation and thus contains echoes of the idea of a shared sense of responsibility based on membership to a community of citizens. On the one hand, it can be viewed as a counter-discourse or counter-narrative in that it connects with a valuing of 'political beliefs' and makes claims to particular sets of citizenship, that is a discourse that registers a citizenship- based definition of responsibility based on membership of a political or imagined community. In this way, the phrase 'it's my job' is less about parental rights – the right to choose – and more about the valuing of a commitment to 'society' and the practices and orientations of citizenship itself. It points to the associational dimensions of citizenship (Lewis 2004) in terms of membership and a form of belonging based on 'political beliefs' as distinct from 'personal beliefs'. On the other hand, the act of doing 'the right thing politically' is compromised by a responsibility and duty towards the child: 'As a parent, I can only worry about my own child at the end of the day'. In this framing, 'doing the right thing politically' is problematised through its disassociation from the child: 'what's more important your job or your children?'

Recently, Reay et al. have written about the inclinations of some White, middle- class parents to exercise choice in a way that undercuts the preferred model of the 'self-interested and self-sufficient individual' (2008, 239). Implicit to 'contemporary cultures', they argue, is a strong valorisation of 'individualisation and privatisation', resulting in the erosion of 'commitments and investments in the public sphere' (Reay et al. 2008). Pointing to the way some White, middle-class parents draw on communitarian principles as framings for their school choices, Reay et al. observe: 'whilst supportive of comprehensive schooling,

[these parents] remain grounded in securing and maintaining advantage. For these parents commitment to comprehensives is conditional on ensuring their children's educational success' (2008, 241). What Reay et al. (2007) refer to as 'self-interested altruism' is used to capture the intersecting dynamics of the terms self-regarding and community-regarding, revealing the cross- cutting dynamic of individual and collective impulses. Such an argument is important in the way it problematises the dichotomy of self-interest and valuing the community; a dichotomy that informs a number of important debates in the academic and government literature around school choice. In identifying the potential weakness of a choice-based system in education for example, many researchers tend to mobilise school choice and community as speaking to different sets of trends and paradigms, with the former often assumed to undermine associations and relations that are expressive of the latter. Table 1 demonstrates how the terms choice and community sometimes appear to invoke competing and contrasting forms of identifications and associations:

As Oria et al. observe, school choice generates 'an ethical framework which encourages "personal" values and legitimates parents in the pursuit of competitive familial advantage through education' (2007, 92), in effect undermining the kinds of vocabularies and values expressed through the framing and expression of community – solidarity, reciprocity, mutual assistance and responsibility in collective action. For some researchers, then, the introduction of market mechanisms in education has led to an intensification of trends of ethnic segregation and social and community polarisation (Johnson 2007; Tomlinson 1997), precisely because there is assumed to be a 'conflict between parental choice and community cohesion' (ODPM 2004, 5.59) – school choice encourages parents to exit their local network of secondary schools and therefore facilitates forms of voluntary segregation, resulting in people from different backgrounds living out parallel or separate lives. Among some anti-choice commentators, for example, the survival or imaginary of community is held to be contingent on the enduring presence of the 'good local school', which is thought to act as a locus for the 'regeneration of communities' (NUT 2005, 9). The implementation of school choice is, therefore, sometimes understood to undermine or displace efforts that are principally aimed at building and sustaining communication and relationships between people of different cultures and faiths, reflecting the lack of cultural currency afforded to community in governmental discourses around choice.

In the above extract, however, Pauline shows how impulses that are geared towards preserving a commitment to citizenship-based conceptions of responsibility are often compromised through an investment in the child. For Pauline, the valuing of a commitment to 'larger society', which links up discourses of social mixing and a communitarian impulse, is constrained by her son's educational needs. Arguably, then, any commitment to a discourse of citizenship obligation based on membership of a 'community' appears to be conditional upon the child being educationally malleable in the first place – that is, able to fit potentially into any school. Moreover, it suggests that a 'calculating' or 'maximising' position is only achievable where the child is workable into a subject that 'fits': educationally and not just socially. On the other hand, we might argue the reverse: that a discourse of choice is conditional upon the idea that a child's social or educational needs are known sufficiently and in advance, and that it is possible for a parent to make a judgement about which is the 'right school' for their child in cases where all schools have been considered. Such a view, however, trades on the narrow assumption that subjects are constituted through discourse; that a child's needs are reducible to the availability of signs

made possible through a discourse of choice. Instead, it is important to be circumspect about the general applicability of grand claims about the productive power of discourses to determine subjects, given that there is always likely to be multiple sources of 'excess, including counter discourses offered by the family, community of belonging, or a cluster of experiences, each of which may help to produce processes of psychic and social non-identification' (Fink et al. 2004, 22).

The following extract is taken from an interview with Caroline who is a single parent with two children. Her eldest son, Owen, attends an independent secondary school in Camden having received a public bursary. Sam, her youngest son, is expected to attend a specialist secondary school in Kings Langley, Hertfordshire that offers a learning programme suited to children with special educational needs. Caroline recognises that Sam's difficulties in learning affects his ability to 'fit into the classroom' of any school. This has a powerful bearing on Caroline's choice, as she explains: 'So we thought it would be very harsh on him if we could get a secondary school to place this child who doesn't fit'. Hence, Caroline registers a strong concern over the lack of suitability of some schools:

I wasn't prepared for my child to be experimented on by sending him to a [local] school

… Because this is another way you can approach it, just saying they are trying and they're getting better each year, but I wasn't prepared for him to be experimented on. Some children do well in those situations because there are some children you can send anywhere. But I decided I wasn't going to send him anywhere and I would do whatever I had to do to send him where I thought he should go, not where the education authority thought to place them.

Caroline's rejection of the role of the education authority stems in part from a belief in the (now) inalienable right of parents to choose for their children. It is an appeal to the parental right to choose, to the individual voice of the parent as against the abstract, oppressive and 'experimental' decision-making of the local authority, expressed, for instance, through the repetition of 'I' in the last sentence. This works to index the voice of the speaker in relations of power and authority. Ironically, then, the policy of parental choice, while seemingly best serving those parents with children who are able to 'fit' educationally into any school, actually has a strong appeal to parents who are comparatively less advantaged by the policy itself. Read in another way, Caroline reproduces certain 'middle class narratives of secondary school choice' where there is an 'implicit, and sometimes explicit, sense of their own child's special- ness; of being too clever and able to go to local state schools' (Reay and Lucey 2004, 44). While Caroline makes no explicit claims to her child being clever, she does use a vocabulary that registers similar, though shifting, understandings of cleverness: 'razor sharp mentality', 'fantastic vocabulary' and 'very lateral'. What is also striking about Pauline and Caroline is the way they relativise meanings and practices of cleverness. Pauline frequently used highly individuating terms to describe her child, commenting on his quirkiness for example. This performs the powerful double role of undermining the idea that their children are in any way 'lacking' and, concurrently, works to legitimise their reluctance to use local school services.

In the use of the phrase 'I wasn't prepared for my son to be experimented on', Caroline makes explicit the idea of the (local) school as a site for trialling government projects, with children emerging as test subjects in these experiments. The idea of experimentation is a powerful metaphor, as is 'educational factory', another term Caroline uses to describe the local secondary school in her area. Both these can be read and interpreted in a number ways, depending on the viewpoint of the analyst. Arguably, they are used here to reference the practice of social engineering in education which has as its aim the promotion of equal opportunities based on a socially equitable admissions system and the organisation of education around meritocratic principles more generally. Caroline, however, is derisive of this approach to education, approximating it to a form of experimentation and an infringement of individual choice and freedom. In particular, she adamantly rejects the role of the local authority in making decisions over where children should go to school. As a result, she is passionately receptive towards the idea of choice and the positions and practices it makes available. The way in which Caroline inhabits and performs the role of the chooser, however, is managed through two differently inflected understandings of responsibility. First, she views it as her responsibility to send her son to a school of her choice, and not one 'where the education authority thought to place them'. Second, in rejecting the way some schools are organised around meritocratic principles of social engineering, Caro- line marks the decision not to send her son to a school in which children are 'experimented' on as containing elements of responsible choosing.

In contrast, Pauline deploys alternative conceptions of responsibility and thus inhabits the field of choice differently to Caroline. Pauline delineates two types of responsibility – 'personal' and 'political'. While the former emerges as the dominant framing for her school choice, she acknowledges the latter for its importance in a 'larger society'. Here, then, the notion of responsibility is subject to sets of contrasting identifications and associations, of the personal and political, and thus stands at the intersection of multiple vocabularies and meanings. Caroline, for example, emphasises the parental right to choose, with its appeals to the autonomous and empowered subject. Her voice therefore echoes and redeems certain public choice perspectives on the willingness and capacity of individuals to be self-maximising and self-interested subjects (Downs 1957, 1967; Dunleavy 1991; Le Grand 1997). Pauline, however, articulates a conception of responsibility geared towards society and communal or shared associations, and thus mobilises or gives voice to meanings and practices framed by other-oriented behaviour. If we take seriously the idea that neo-liberal discourses are implicated in the production of moralised selves (Rose 1999), then the separation of domains of 'personal' and 'political' alluded to by Pauline can be considered an ideological dilemma made possible through the introduction of neo- liberal discourses of choice in public services.

Both Pauline and Caroline engage with choice through deploying a conception of responsibility that is geared towards the child, thereby fulfilling their obligation as responsibilised individuals who act on and for the needs of the child (DES 1991). Pauline, however, resists enacting the preferred or normalised speaking role of the consumer and instead points to competing forms of responsibility based on personal and political beliefs. Pauline's attempts to reconcile and combine these approaches to choice, and thus negotiate competing frameworks of choosing, generate tensions in her talk. While Caroline is less inclined to frame her choice around a citizenship obligation based on a commitment to a 'larger society', to practices of social cohesion or the merits in a local non-selective

comprehensive education, she is no more a consumer than Pauline. Marquand (2004) and Needham (2003) argue that the identifications and practices of consumerism are intrinsically antithetical to the collectivist principle and practices of citizenship, of the Marshallian paradigm of citizenship (see Marshall 1950). In this view, Pauline is more like the citizen than the consumer in that she points to the collectivist impulse in her decision-making, making her actions appear congruent with citizenship obligation. While her inclinations fail to materialise into actions, Pauline nonetheless assimilates into her speech identifications and relations that stretch beyond the remit of the self-interested individual. This suggests that Pauline's strong inclination towards her son and his needs is not based on self-interest and an unrelenting individualism, but rather is more convoluted and shifting.

For David et al. (1997), the promotion of parental choice has facilitated a dissonance between public and private responsibilities, resulting in some mothers having to negotiate their choice in the context of competing forms of responsibility. David et al.'s separation of private and public responsibility and 'public and private discourses of choice' (1997, 397) is helpful in that it illuminates the way mothering, perceived as a necessarily 'private' affair, is negotiated in the context of 'public' valuations of new responsibilities and obligations in the realm of welfare. Yet, in bracketing types of responsibility as markers of public or private discourses, David et al. (1997) fail to capture the unevenness and amorphous character of the public– private distinction (see Clarke 2004b) and the way mothers sometimes articulate and combine public and private conceptions of responsibility when engaged with the positions and practices offered through dominant governmental discourses around choice.

Choosing community: community as a locus of responsibilisation

The notion of active, responsible parenting is also negotiated in the context of meanings and practices of community. The following extract is taken from an interview with Camilla who was born and educated in Kingston, Jamaica. Camilla's experience of school in Jamaica is one characterised by the authoritative leadership of teachers and intractable forms of discipline and control. 'You dare not raise your voice above the teachers or backchat her or him whereas here [in Britain] there's none of that', she remarks. The strong emphasis on discipline and authority connects with Camilla's positive valuation of community:

Andrew: You said take him out of the community and send him.

Camilla: And send him to a school probably on the borders of Bromley or, you know, and I thought I don't want to do that because I'd never know who his friends are. I'd not know any background to them, you know. And it is him being again pulled out of the community, you know rather than be sort of trying to be satisfied with the provisions there and maybe growing up to be a man who fights for the community that he's living on rather than sort of getting something that's already provided.

Camilla demonstrates how community can be imagined spatially through her invocation of Bromley's borders and socially in her concerns with her son's friends. Indeed, Camilla shows how the imaginary of community links up with popular desires for sociality and solidarity, making it a cultural and material resource people draw on and invest in. More powerfully, though, it appears to take on the form of expressions of parental responsibility. It also shows how community is imagined by some mothers as a mode of surveillance and control, in that it offers an imaginary space for overseeing and even managing the potential

relationships built up between people. In this way, Camilla evokes two separate yet interrelated conceptions of responsibility. First, there is a responsibility towards knowing who her son's friends are. Second, there is a responsibility towards safeguarding the notion of community and the associations and identifications it makes available, which link up with elements of a working-class repertoire and valuing of the local and familiar (Reay and Lucey 2000). The powerful interrelation of these two competing definitions of responsibility is demonstrated through the way Camilla articulates the latter as creating the conditions of possibility for sustaining the former.

For Camilla, community generates circuits of belonging and attachment, but more importantly, works to insulate people from a potentially threatening and unpredictable outside. Not just schools but imaginary spaces, such as the borders of Bromley, emerge as the repositories of all kinds of fears, anxieties and uncertainties. Community, in this context, works to isolate, detach, cut off and protect individuals from an imaginary and uncertain outside. At the same time, community is constituted as some- thing, which needs recovering, protecting and defending, indicating that community is an area in which some parents have an interest and a stake. Camilla's desire to produce a child that in the future 'fights for the community' makes visible the inter- connection between ideas of belonging and responsibility. In this way, belonging can be understood to sometimes sit alongside active processes of exclusion (Creed 2006), as Massey observes:

And in that process the boundaries of the place, and the imagination and building of its 'character', are part and parcel of the definition of who is an insider and who is not; of who is a 'local', and what that term should be mean, and who is to be excluded. It is a space of bounded identities; a geography of rejection. (1995, 194)

Exclusion is thus not just a crucial strategy of the 'fearful' middle classes (Ball and Vincent 2001) but extends across class and ethnic boundaries to different individuals and groups. Moreover, it opens up questions around the extent to which it is only middle-class parents who think in terms of the 'future' as a framing for their school choice. Reay and Ball argue that there is little evidence of working-class parents 'attempting to predict or channel the futures of their children' (1998, 433). Instead, they argue, working-class parents think in limited terms of the here and now, of the local, familiar and communal, as against their middle-class counterparts who are constructed as being more likely to work with a conceptualisation of 'future happiness' (1998, 439) unbounded by temporal or spatial limitations. Camilla, however, shows how community is an important discursive resource for imagining, projecting and protecting future selves and for containing such projections. In particular, community communicates ideas around responsibility, both parental and broader definitions based on communal or shared membership to a group. Camilla's commitment to community is simultaneously a commitment to her son and thus links with parental framings of responsibility.

In this way, Camilla can be understood to envisage community as a space for containing some of these projected fears and anxieties. Camilla's desire to see her son succeed in school is crosscut by uncertainties relating to 'pulling him out of the community'. Camilla's decision to send her son to the local school is therefore a calculated and instrumental one in that it connects with an idea of the boy's future. Moreover, it combines responsibility in community with responsibility in choosing – that is, responsibility in community is made

congruent with responsibility towards the child and his or her present/future welfare. The next extract is taken from an interview with Mary who is a single mother with one son. Here, Mary is describing some of the differences between schools in terms of their admissions policy and, more broadly, the effects of this on the racial composition of some schools:

Mary: It shows in, well God, in Lambeth which is next to Peckham and stuff it seems like they're kind of picking their kids. They've got their own entrance exam and you have to know naval history and so, you know, they were really kind of selecting, you know kids who have that and kids who have that tend to be White. It's not about saying they were doing it in a racial way necessarily but that's how it panned out. I don't know, I just … the main advantage of living in central London is the diversity and, you know, I just thought it'd be good for him to go to a school that handled that well rather than people who just try to kind of ignore it, stuff around it.

Race emerges as a powerful framing for Mary's choice; in particular, the principle and practice of social mix or ethnic diversity in schools. Other researchers (Reay et al. 2007, 2008) link this valuing of ethnic diversity to broader trends of communal responsibility and civic engagement with the polity. However, these researchers also point to the way these patterns of rhetorical speech around community and multiculturalism, especially among some White, middle-class parents, are deeply embedded in mechanistic, acquisitive acts of appropriation, where the ethnic 'Other' emerges as a valuable asset for the children's 'cultural knowledge and social skills' (Reay et al. 2008, 243). Reay et al. argue that it is this 'instrumentalising impulse' (2008, 244) that brings into question parents' commitment to creating and sustaining political projects of community-building and multiculturalism. They observe in the White, middle-class parents whom they interviewed 'more self-interest than altruism and a superficial endorsement of social mix rather than any actual commitment to social mixing' (2008, 252). However, Mary's apparent commitment to 'diversity' registers both a communitarian, altruistic impulse and a calculating, acquisitive one. As she remarks later in the interview:

Mary: I would have preferred him to go there because then he would have learned Urdu and he would have an extra language under his belt, which he doesn't have. I don't know it's just we live in a world … yes, obviously this is England and there's White people but we live in a world which is mainly Black and Asian, you know is not White. And so if he travels or anything then he might as well get used to it now, you know.

Mary identifies the 'main advantage' of living in 'London' to be its 'diversity' and favours a school that embraces difference rather than occludes it. From this position, Mary evokes a strong communitarian impulse in the way she accounts for her choice. On the other hand, her talk registers an acquisitive and calculating attitude towards choice. In the use of the phrase 'he would have learned Urdu and he would have an extra language under his belt', Mary ascribes a kind of cost-benefit framework to her choice. The value placed on the opportunity to learn Urdu, for instance, tends to position 'diversity' as a potential resource, something to possess and profit from. This has important implications for thinking through the public–private distinction as a stable separation of the domestic and intimate sphere on the one hand and the state and market sectors on the other. By viewing the way mothers articulate and combine different registers of responsibility, we can begin to see how

distinctions of citizen and consumer, community and individual impact upon on each other, making the public– private dichotomy a shifting and fluid construct subject to negotiations over time and space (see Lister 1997).

Conclusion

The interviews featured in this article open up questions around the extent to which some mothers can be regarded as consumers and/or citizens in relation to education services. This is captured through the ways in which these mothers assemble and combine contradictory understandings of responsibility and thus move between and negotiate conflicting sets of positions and associations. These understandings and interpretations of responsibility are shifting and unstable precisely because they connect simultaneously with discourses around citizenship obligation based on a so-called 'decommodified' relationship to an imaginary or political community (Esping-Anderson 1990) and discourses around consumerism in which attitudes and orientations are assumed to be shaped by instrumental, self-interested, acquisitive impulses (Hauptmann 1996; Needham 2003). This demonstrates, on the one hand, how some mothers negotiate the meaning and practice of responsibility as a framing for their school choice. On the other hand, it complicates the conventional citizen–consumer bifurcation, in which it is some- times assumed people 'are consumers only in the market place', while 'in the public domain they are citizens' (Marquand 2004, 135). The intersecting impulses and tendencies that underpin some mothers' school choices reveal the nuances of these discourses and practices and their interpenetration. It is clear, at least in this study, that some mothers engage in active processes of negotiating their choice around a multitude of responsibilities, with a principled focus on wanting to sustain some kind of commitment to community or ethnic diversity. But this commitment is often displaced by or supplemented with an uncompromising desire to do the 'best' by the child and his or her future welfare; a desire that is encouraged and legitimated through the promotion of values of the market, choice and individualism in education (Oria et al. 2007).

Needham (2003) criticises the way New Labour sought to decollectivise the public and its relationship to public services, through treating citizens as individuated agents who pursue self-interest and thus undermining their relationship to public services and the sense of civic responsibility and duty it carries. This article demonstrates how some mothers straddle different ideas of what it means, or should mean, to be self- interested, responsible and reasonable, thus complicating the idea that a public ethos is necessarily destroyed through the so-called commodification of relations between users and providers of public services (Marquand 2004; Needham 2003). Rather, my interviews make visible how some mothers, through the process of negotiating ideas around responsible and active parenting, inhabit and negotiate a number of intersect- ing and crosscutting positions, which resist easy categorisation. This breaks down binary distinctions based on categories of public and private, collective and individ- ual, citizen and consumer, and so forth, and points to the indeterminate character of the subject as unsettled and unfinished. Furthermore, it outlines the difficulty surrounding researchers' attempts to manage appropriate forms of expression, which can adequately capture the voice of the speaker. This is demonstrated through the

ways in which some mothers actively engage with negotiations around what it means to act 'responsibly' and 'reasonably' and formulate their choices around powerful framings of gender, race, class, citizenship obligation and the needs of the child.

This has implications for thinking through and beyond school choice as reducible to stable moments of class articulation. Choice creates its own trajectories, motives, fantasies, aspirations, valuations and sensibilities, and thus it is crucial not to condense these highly uneven and mobile sets of social contradictions and disparate voices to moments of a single classed, raced or gendered articulation. At the same time, I am not advocating we throw the baby out with the bathwater and deploy a method of analysis that effectively undermines the salience of categories of, say, social class as framings for parents' school choices. Instead, a more useful approach might be to analyse the ways in which parents confront certain dilemmas, repertoires and negoti- ations differently as exercises in elements of class talk. Such an approach is important for showing, on the one hand, the continual possibility of the dynamic variation in these forms and their intersection with other discursive categories. On the other hand, it stresses how behaviours are structured through discourses and 'rhetorical high-wire acts that give otherwise meaningless behaviour sociocultural intelligibility' (Jackson 2001, 228), where speaking properly or in the 'right' way appears to be an instance of the dialogic exchange that constitutes the discursive production of the social subject.

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