

Academically elite students in Singapore

A collective moral stance toward aspirations and trajectories

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This paper draws on a Linguistic Ethnography (Blommaert & Rampton 2011) of a group of academically elite students in Singapore. The group comprises locals born in Singapore, as well as immigrants from China and Vietnam. My informants all attended a top-ranked secondary school in Singapore. I present data from interviews and a focus group discussion with them about their aspirations and educational pathways. These academically elite students describe a conventional aspiration amongst their peers involving transnational mobility and attending top-ranked universities in the US and UK. My informants discursively construct this aspiration as preferred, with a sense that they are expected to conform to such a trajectory. I argue that their consistent orientation toward the ideal trajectory and production of discourse about it denotes a collective moral stance (Ochs & Capps 2002), and hence a disposition embedded in a social field (Hanks 2005). In response to Archer's (2012) theorisations that dominant modes of reflexivity have changed, my informants' relatively stable orientations and ways of acting demonstrate how Bourdieu's notion of habitus continues to be relevant in late-modernity. In practical terms, this study also shows a clear link between elite schools, and the aspirations and resultant trajectories of individuals. This has direct implications for policy-makers in Singapore where the Ministry of Education has been attempting to curb elitism in the education system.

Keywords: stance, elite students, habitus, aspirations, trajectories

Introduction

A key area of concern in sociology today is how highly developed societies are situated in a stage of ‘late-modernity’. To social theorists such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), ‘late-modernity’, as a label, is used to denote complex societies not completely at a post-modern phase of development, but continuing to portray characteristics of modernity.¹ The current state of society is therefore a consequence of adjusting to an earlier stage of modernity (Dawson 2010: 190). More specifically, Giddens (1990) observes that there exists an intrinsic link between modernity and globalisation, in that changes to modernist structures and behaviours often correspond with phenomena associated with globalisation.

One prominent position within depictions of late-modern societies is that held by Archer (2010, 2012). She contends that advanced capitalist democracies are increasingly characterized by “contextual incongruity”, where “natal background and socialization practices no longer provide guidelines to action for the young members of any class...” (Archer 2010: 296). The proliferation of new situations encountered by youths, brought about by post-industrial economic developments and globalisation (Archer 2012: 39–41), makes it difficult for the young to rely on past experiences and routine action in order to make choices in life. Archer (2010: 301) thus posits that “the utility of the portmanteau term *habitus* peters out”, in light of these historical changes.

This paper takes a slightly different position to Archer regarding the exact nature of late-modern societies. Rather than focusing on the rising prevalence of “contextual incongruity” and the concomitant futility of socialisation practices in such societies, I suggest that there are contexts in specific late-modern political economies where stable orientations toward particular life choices continue to exist and are likely to endure. I offer the education system in Singapore as a case study.

Singapore is an advanced economy particularly susceptible to forces of globalisation due to its small size in terms of population and geography, and reliance on trade. Crucially, talent immigration is intertwined with state policies to counter flagging birth rates in the nation. The city-state has thus been described as an “emerging immigrant gateway city” (Benton-Short & Price 2008: 10) and “trans-national turnstile” for migrants (Yeoh & Yap 2008: 200), in part, due to its commensurate policies for attracting various immigrants to fill specific economic roles in the nation. To Stroud and Wee (2010: 184) Singapore’s territorial permeability

1. Also see Bauman’s (2000) similar expositions on ‘Liquid Modernity’. Dawson (2010) offers a useful differentiation and critique of how Giddens (1990, 1991), Beck (1992, 2009) and Bauman (2000) theorised ‘late-modernity’.

brought about by transnational mobility and its consumerist society are features that mark it as a late-modern society.

Within the institution of the school, Rampton (2006: 4–8) notes that immigration and the advent of neo-liberal market principles were forces that characterised British urban schooling in late-modernity. Likewise, the same two forces of globalisation have resulted in differentiation and complexity amongst student populations within Singapore schools.² One of Singapore's population policies involves offering scholarships to secondary school students from neighboring countries (e.g. China and Vietnam) who are excellent in Math and Science. This is done in the hope that they will augment the local workforce and some might eventually settle in Singapore. Market principles of performativity and competition were also introduced into the school system (J. Tan 1998). This occurred in the form of overt secondary school rankings and autonomisation of some schools (J. Tan 1998: 51–55). Both sets of policies (i.e. recruitment of foreign students and market principles) have been in place in Singapore since the 1990s.

An investigation of how youths in Singapore reflect on their life choices hence provides a potentially useful study for assessing Archer's (2010, 2012) claims on diminishing relevance of notions like *habitus* (Archer 2010: 296). I focus on a select group of individuals who graduated from a top-ranked secondary school in Singapore that I call St Thomas' School. I examine how they described their life choices and resultant trajectories upon leaving St Thomas'.

Broadly, my analysis and discussion is based on the dominant view within sociolinguistics regarding the reflexivity of language, and that language indexes social phenomena and ideologies beyond the denotative meaning of words (Gumperz & Hymes 1972). Consequently, the indexicality of speech and signs, that is, the values, belief systems, social groups that the linguistic form connotes, is the focus of my analysis (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 10). I employ Ochs and Capps' (2002) notion of *moral stance* as an analytic framework to attend to the discourse produced by my informants. This is with the understanding that stance is about how a speaker necessarily positions him/herself with regard to his/her interlocutor (real or imagined), and any object of sociocultural value (e.g. the school one attends or a potential migratory trajectory), in a specific context, through one's linguistic production (Jaffe 2009: 4).

In the next section, I review recent sociolinguistic literature pertaining to stance and reflexivity. I then provide a precis of the education system in Singapore, as well as the position of St Thomas' School within the regime. This contextualisation is followed by outlining the nature of my interview data as part of an

2. Lu (forthcoming) suggests that these demographic changes in school populations may be perceived as contributing to Singapore's societal 'super-diversity' in the Vertovec (2007) sense.

ethnographic study, and the background of my informants, all of whom are graduates from St Thomas'. I examine how my informants talked about their aspirations and trajectories upon graduation from St Thomas'. I demonstrate that these students take a collective moral stance of preferring a particular educational pathway, with an expectation that they ought to do so. Via the lens of Bourdieu's theorisations regarding habitus and field, I posit that these acts of stance-taking are linked to the elitist education system and top-ranked secondary school that they attended, with implications for education policy in Singapore.

The aims of this paper are hence two-fold. In the first instance, I wish to demonstrate how particular political economies, such as Singapore, might enrich our understanding of late-modern societies. The case of my informants from an elite school in Singapore suggests how specific aspirations and life choices may be institutionalised and made conventional for individuals. I seek not to offer a direct critique of Archer's (2010, 2012) theorisations on reflexivity, nor a completely contrarian stance on the prevalence of 'contextual incongruity'. Instead, I provide a view that there are pockets in society where notions such as Bourdieu's (1986, 1991) habitus might appear persistent, and even durable in the foreseeable future. This is accurate at least at the elite level of Singapore's education system, which is very much entrenched in and intertwined with the nation's political structure. Second, the study demonstrates a clear link between elite schools, and the aspirations and resultant trajectories of individuals who have attended these schools. This poses a direct challenge to policy-makers in Singapore, where the Ministry of Education has in recent years attempted to curb elitism in education.

Reflexivity and stance

As noted, I see language as necessarily involving reflexivity (Hanks 1995; Gumperz & Levinson 1996). In James Gee's (2005: 97) words, this means that, "language simultaneously reflects reality and constructs it to be a certain way." Within such a paradigm, stance (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009) has emerged as one approach to look at the associations between speakers and wider social structures. In Du Bois' (2007: 169) overview of stance research, stance is taken to mean "a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means (language, gesture, and other symbolic forms), through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, position subjects (themselves and others), and align with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of value in the sociocultural field." Parsed more simply by Kiesling (2011: 2), stance in Du Bois' (2007) sense denotes relationships between the speaker and some discursive figure, where the discursive figure may be the interlocutor, an object or idea in the discourse or other texts.

To Jaffe (2009: 4), investigating the kinds of stances that are habitually and conventionally linked to certain subject positions allows us to conceptualize the relationship between acts of stance-taking and the sociocultural field. Jaffe thus views the study of stance as focused on the processes of indexicalisation, with all acts of stance-taking being “indirect indices” of political, social, ideological and cultural fields:

That is, as an analytical framework, stance does not essentialise social categories, but rather, looks at the subject positions and relationships that can be enacted through forms of talk and then, as a second level of analysis, how these are statistically and/or stereotypically mapped on to named linguistic systems (‘accent’, ‘dialect’, ‘language’, ‘mixed codes’) or less explicitly named discourse categories (register, genre, discourse) made up of clusters of features. (Jaffe 2009: 13)

While there may be several different types of stances identified in previous studies (Du Bois 2007: 145), Jaffe (2009: 5)³ suggests evaluation as one of central concern. In Thompson and Hunston’s (2005) view, which Jaffe (2009) also cites, evaluation when used in the study of stance is about “the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values” (Thompson & Hunston 2005: 5).

In this vein, Ochs and Capps’ (2002) notion of ‘moral stance’ can be seen as a form of evaluation in stance-taking. To Ochs and Capps (2002), a moral stance is taken by a speaker in the telling of his or her experience, and shows the speaker’s “disposition towards what is good or valuable and how one ought to live in the world” (Ochs & Capps 2002: 45). Ochs and Capps (2002) developed ‘moral stance’ as one of five dimensions through which narratives may be studied, the other four being tellership, tellability, embeddedness of the speaker in his/her account, and linearity of the account.

Because of the reflexivity of language, the research interview can often be a site of analysis, rather than a neutral point from which data is elicited (Baynham 2013: 76). Indeed, Baynham (2013: 80), like Ochs and Capps (2002), sees narratives in research interviews as a locus where stance is produced by interviewees. To Ochs and Capps (2002: 20), research interviews are a typical situation in which narratives are produced, and where they contain a cluster of characteristics that tend to fall at one end of these continua: one active teller; highly tellable account; relatively detached from surrounding talk and activity; linear temporal and causal

3. Jaffe (2009: 5) offers a tabulated list of terms used in various studies by different authors, though ‘moral stance’ is not among them.

organization; certain and constant moral stance. Narratives in interviews are therefore seen as highly amenable to systematic analysis (Ochs & Capps 2002: 20).

While Ochs and Capps (2002) do not themselves investigate research interviews in their work, I propose that their notion of moral stance might be a useful framework to examine my informants' accounts of and orientations toward their aspirations and trajectories. This is for two reasons. First, my informants' accounts exist in the context of dialogic interviews, where informants are asked to describe sequences of events and their experiences. The discourse produced by my interviewees may be perceived as "narratives of personal experience" (Ochs & Capps 2002) where moral stances are often taken, and thus available to be analysed.

Second, as Jaffe (2009: 13) reminds us, the analysis of my informants' moral stance(s) is with the aim of looking at how their stance-taking could be "indirect indices" of political, social, ideological and cultural fields. Moral stance can be a productive way of examining if there is a consistent and collective disposition amongst my informants toward a certain educational pathway. If we take Bourdieu's habitus to mean a set of deeply internalized dispositions or orientations (Swartz 2002: 62S; Hanks 2005: 69), the consistent production of a particular moral stance toward a certain educational pathway amongst a group of individuals might point to a collective disposition, and hence, shared habitus. With this in mind, I now turn to contextualising Singapore's education landscape.

Secondary education in Singapore

In order to understand the background of my informants and the education system into which they have been socialised, I turn our attention to two key features of the local education landscape – the stratification of secondary schools and the state's recruitment of students from neighbouring countries. The depiction of both is crucial in demonstrating how St Thomas' School sits atop an elitist education regime, and my informants' position in such a system.

Stratification of secondary schools in Singapore

Singapore's education system has generally been described by local scholars (C. Tan 2008; Lim 2012) as having contradicting strands of egalitarianism and elitism. On one hand, the state proclaims meritocracy as a key principle of governance (K. P. Tan 2008: 7), where any individual may be promoted and rewarded through hard work and performance in school or at the work place. On the other hand, the state has established an education system "that sorts individuals for

positions of leadership in order to maximise the average level of well-being in a society” (Lim 2012: 3).

The elitist strand arguably became more pronounced from the 1990s when secondary schools with a history of excellent academic achievement were granted greater financial and curricular autonomy (J. Tan 1998: 51). These are known as independent schools in Singapore. The secondary school landscape thus became progressively stratified in two ways: (i) in terms of the academic quality of students they admit; (ii) in terms of the financial and material support enjoyed by the school.

In the first instance, enrolment in all secondary schools in Singapore is largely based on academic merit.⁴ Established since 1960, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) is a nation-wide assessment that all primary school students must undertake at age 12. Every student competes to enter secondary schools of his/her choice, based on his/her PSLE score. The minimum entry score of each school, also known as the ‘cut-off point’, is determined by the PSLE score of the student who fills up the last place in the school (Ministry of Education 2015). All secondary schools in Singapore are therefore differentiated via descending PSLE cut-off points that correspond to the academic quality of students they admit. Schools with the highest cut-off points in the nation are always independent schools.

Besides the academic quality of their students, independent schools are different from mainstream schools in various material aspects. They charge private fees for students in addition to receiving state funding, while other schools only charge nominal tuition fees.⁵ They are also largely autonomous of state control in their curriculum design and hiring of staff. School facilities, the quality of teachers, rigour in academic learning and breadth of extra-curricular activities are usually recognised by the public as being of a higher standard than mainstream schools. The introduction of the Integrated Programme (IP) in independent schools in 2002, further marked them as elite institutions within the secondary school system

4. A small proportion of students are admitted into secondary schools under the Direct School Admission programme, where they are selected based on non-academic merit such as in certain sports or the arts. On average, around 2800 students per year out of a national cohort of about 40000, are admitted into secondary schools under this scheme (Ministry of Education 2013).

5. As at 2010, independent schools charge a fee between \$200 – 300 SGD per month for local students, while all other schools have a fee of \$10 – 30 SGD per month. Fees for international students in independent schools range between \$1200–1500 SGD per month. The top 1/3 of each PSLE cohort is awarded a scholarship that pays for all tuition fees in independent schools. All students admitted to St Thomas’ on academic merit would qualify for this and do not pay any fees (Ministry of Education website a).

(Lim 2012: 3). The programme allows top-performing students already enrolled in independent schools to skip the O Levels,⁶ and instead undergo a six-year curriculum that prepares them for either the A Levels or the International Baccalaureate. It is designed to be more holistic, with greater scope for independent learning and engagement in community projects. In 2004, the IP was introduced in a few other top-performing schools that are not of independent status. To date, out of more than 150 secondary schools in Singapore, 18 offer the IP and 12 of these are independent schools (Ministry of Education website b).

The following flowchart contextualises the position of independent and top-performing schools, in relation to other mainstream schools. It also provides an overview of the educational pathways available to students in Singapore today.

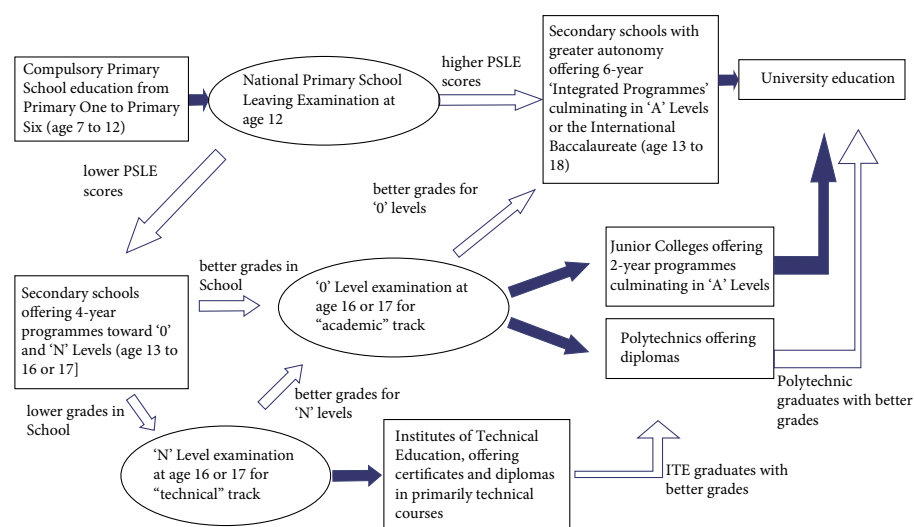


Figure 1. Educational pathways in Singapore

Singapore's recruitment of foreign students

Concurrent with this stratified education regime is a state policy that attracts top-performing students from neighbouring countries to study in Singapore. The Singapore government has, since the 1990s, began actively initiating policies to shape Singapore's infrastructure as a regional education hub for foreign students. This is in the hope that some of them may be retained in the workforce

6. The General Certificate of Education (GCE) O Levels are examinations typically taken after four years of secondary education in Singapore. The GCE A Levels are taken after six years.

to contribute to the local economy (Yeoh 2007). One of these schemes involves offering scholarships to students from neighboring countries who are excellent in Math and Science. The policy is aimed at augmenting a population with one of the lowest birthrates in the world, and extending Singapore's soft power in the region.

The recruitment policy typically targets fixed education levels in China and Vietnam at the end of junior middle school (age 15), at the end of senior middle school (age 17) and in the first year of university (age 19). All my informants who were recruited via such scholarships arrived in Singapore at age 15. For this particular recruitment scheme, top-ranked secondary schools in Singapore routinely visit prominent schools in major cities in China and Vietnam in order to headhunt pupils from these localities and attract them with scholarships to study in Singapore.

Potential candidates at age 15, with already excellent academic attainments, are interviewed for scholastic aptitude and sit through a series of assessments testing proficiency in basic English and Math. Individuals who accept the scholarship, arrive in Singapore with free education till their A Levels. There is the possibility of further sponsorship should they do well enough to land a place in any local university. They are generally one year older than their Singaporean counterparts in the same cohort, due in part to their lower proficiencies in English.

St Thomas' School⁷ at the top of the pyramid

How then is St Thomas' School positioned in this education landscape typified by stratification and injected with immigrant students? Even amongst independent schools, St Thomas' is regarded as one of the best in its academic performance and most prestigious by Singaporeans. It was one of the first schools allowed by the Ministry of Education to become independent in 1990. Students in Years One to Four (age 13 to 16) are segregated by gender into two campuses, while those in Years Five and Six (aged 17 and 18) are merged on a single campus. The school prescribes an Integrated Programme of six years that culminates in the GCSE A Levels. The total student population in Years One to Four is about 3500, while Years Five and Six is around 2500. Academic staff number about 600. The school models itself partially after a British public boarding school, with boarding complexes where all immigrant students and a small number of Singaporean students are accommodated. Facilities on one campus (shared by the boys in Years One

7. I was a student in St Thomas' from 1993 to 1999, and also taught in the school from 2007 to 2012. The information on the school provided is partially based on my experience whilst a teacher there.

to Four and the co-ed Years Five to Six) include two football stadia with 8-lane running track, Olympic-sized swimming pool, indoor gymnasium, three indoor multi-purpose halls, and numerous auditoriums and lecture theatres.

Recall that only top-performing secondary schools in Singapore participate in the proactive recruitment of students from neighbouring countries. In St Thomas', immigrant students on scholarships make up around 10% of the student population in Years Five and Six. Most of them have been recruited directly by St Thomas' at age 15, with a smaller number having been recruited by other top-performing secondary schools, before gaining entry to St Thomas' via the O Levels.

The academic performance of students is exemplary by national standards. For example, in 2011, 49.8% of the 2010 cohort attained at least 4 As in content subjects, while 68.3% attained at least 3As in content subjects.⁸ 19% of the cohort had perfect scores for all their subjects. For the most common subjects that Singaporeans read, 50.8% of the cohort scored A for General Paper (a compulsory subject akin to combining General Studies in the UK with elements of English Language) and 74.2% scored A for Math. This is compared to the national average of 20.5% and 50.7% respectively (St Thomas' Annual School Report 2011: 10–13).

Also pertinent is the trajectory undertaken by large numbers of graduates from St Thomas'. According to the school's brochure, "Every year, approximately 470 are offered a place in top UK and US universities. Others who decide to continue their quest for knowledge in Singapore regularly fill half the number of places in the Medical and Law faculties – the most competitive faculties at the National University of Singapore" (St Thomas' School brochure 2013: 10). Given the fact that the total number of students in each graduating cohort is around 1250, the figure of "470 are offered a place in top UK and US universities" suggests that almost 40% of students in St Thomas' do so annually.

Taken together, St Thomas' facilities, its students' academic performance and trajectory upon graduation all mark the school's position at the pinnacle of Singapore's stratified secondary school landscape.

The data and my informants

The data I present in this paper are part of an ethnographic study that I undertook in Singapore between March and December 2014. The study comprises two datasets. The first dataset consists of life history interviews that I conducted with 20 individuals. This was focused on uncovering the educational pathways they undertook, as well as how they experienced life in each school they attended. The

8. A typical student in St Thomas' School will read five to six subjects for the A Levels. Some have special dispensation to read up to nine subjects.

second dataset was collected while I was a participant-observer for six months in a particular peer group of 11 core members, of whom three were involved in the life history interviews. This peer group is made up of individuals who had graduated from St Thomas' in 2011. Based on the approach of interpretive sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982), data gained from earlier interviews were transcribed, annotated in fieldnotes, analysed and then followed up in subsequent interviews and focus group discussions (only with the peer group).

Informants in life history interviews comprise two individuals born in Singapore, six born in Vietnam (all six recruited by the state at age 15), one born in Saipan, one born in Taiwan, one born in India, and nine born in China (eight were recruited by the state at age 15). Informants in the peer group consisted of eight individuals born in Singapore, one born in China, and two born in Vietnam.

While there may be an obvious gap in economic development between Singapore and developing nations like China and Vietnam, this is not to say that my informants born in developing countries lived in relative material deprivation and poverty. Those born outside Singapore were all raised in prosperous urban centres. Informants from Vietnam were from Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Hue. All informants from China were from provincial capitals or cities such as Shenzhen, Zhengzhou and Chongqing. 18 out of 20 life history interviewees have parents who work as secondary school teachers, university lecturers, or administrators in the civil service. All 20 have at least one parent who graduated from university.

Like Singapore, the secondary school landscapes in China and Vietnam are highly stratified,⁹ with an academically selective system for enrolment into top-ranked middle schools in each major city. Consequently, all my informants raised in Singapore, China and Vietnam, have been socialised into similar selective education systems that emphasized individual performativity, with high stakes examinations at various institutional stages. They have been highly successful in such a system, being funneled into/through the top-ranked schools in their respective localities, before attending a top-ranked secondary school in Singapore that is St Thomas' School. All 20 informants in life history interviews scored at least three As in their A Levels. By virtue of my informants' academic attainments and educational trajectory, it would be reasonable to consider them academic elites in the context of Singapore. Nonetheless, this paper is less concerned with the objective description or categorisation of my informants as an elite grouping, and more with how their talk may reflect their exclusive social positions.

9. This characterisation is based on my informants' representation of their life histories before they arrived in Singapore. The depiction of stratified middle schools in China is corroborated by Pérez-Milans' (2013) ethnography of three such schools in Zhejiang, as well as Yang's (2016a) study of Singapore's scholarship recruitment process in Nanchang.

The life history interviews I conducted are divided into three main phases during which informants are invited to recount their experiences in: (i) schools prior and leading to their enrolment in St Thomas'; (ii) St Thomas' and leading to their trajectory upon graduating from St Thomas'; (iii) subsequent pathways after leaving St Thomas'. The accounts I focus on in this paper are produced toward the end of phase (ii), when informants were explicitly asked to describe their aspirations and sequence of events that led to their resultant trajectories. The generic questions I asked all 20 informants in this context are phrased approximately in the following manner, and in this sequence: (a) When did you start thinking about life after the A Levels? Can you describe the sequence of events that led to your decision after graduating from St Thomas'?; (b) How do your aspirations compare with your peers in school?; (c) Did you discuss your aspirations with your parents?. Questions (b) and (c) were not asked if the informants' accounts to the previous question had already provided the answer. These accounts may be considered personal narratives (Baynham 2011: 64) or narratives of personal experience (Labov 1997; Ochs & Capps 2002), during which informants produced extended talk describing past events or situations with little co-construction or contestation from me as the interviewer.

In this paper, I am interested in my informants' moral stances (Ochs & Capps 2002) regarding their aspirations and trajectories from St Thomas', that is, how informants position themselves in relation to the aspirations and trajectories they are describing. On the basis that these evaluations are "themselves both social facts and agents in the exercise of social power" (Jaffe 1999: 15), careful attention to how my informants talk about their trajectories can reveal the meanings and values attached to these educational pathways. It must also be noted that I was a former student (1994–1999) and then teacher (2007–2012) in St Thomas' School, teaching students in Years Five to Six. All informants were my former students who attended and graduated from St Thomas' School between 2007 and 2012. My position in the dialogic interviews is therefore not only one of researcher, but also someone familiar to the interviewees and an insider of St Thomas'. All of these must be borne in mind as I proceed to focus on interview data during which informants recounted how and why they decided on their trajectories upon graduating from St Thomas'.

I make three empirical observations in the analysis of these accounts:

1. All informants described a conventional aspiration of attending university in the US/UK, or of reading Medicine or Law in Singapore amongst their peers in St Thomas'.
2. 19 out of 20 informants in life history interviews positioned themselves as preferring this conventional aspiration.

3. Informants who did not attain the conventional aspiration tended to justify their current educational pathways or told anecdotes of how they had to justify their trajectories to others. In contrast, such discursive moves were absent in the accounts of informants who attained the conventional aspiration.

In the following, I provide examples of these accounts and argue that they demonstrate a consistent and collective moral stance amongst my informants toward their aspirations and trajectories.

A conventional aspiration in St Thomas'

A recurrent theme in all my informants' accounts is how each individual decided which universities to attend. In fact, the notion of not attending university at all was not mentioned. This is in the context of separate interviews with 20 informants, totaling 65.5 hours. The discussion on life choices after the A Levels often lasted at least 20 minutes for each individual. Any alternate idea to attending universities could have been brought up when discussing their life experiences in St Thomas' or earlier life stages, as when, for example I asked them, "Can you tell me when you started thinking about life after the A Levels?" or "How did your aspirations compare with others in school?", but this never occurred. Significantly, when discussing life choices after the A Levels, my informants all referred to a ubiquitous aspiration amongst their St Thomas' peers to attend top universities in the US and UK, or to read Medicine or Law in Singapore. I give some examples below.

Gabriel discusses in Extract 1 (lines crucial to my argument indicated in bold) how he was applying to UK and US universities while he was in St Thomas', a choice that he calls the "proven track" (line 6).

Extract 1.

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Luke: | You can tell me the process of how you went to select |
| 2 | | your schools, how you decided on your current choice |
| 3 | | right now. |
| 4 | Gabriel: | So I applied to UK and US schools. How I came |
| 5 | | to the decision was mainly following what most |
| 6 | | people did, the so called proven track. My friends |
| 7 | | were pretty much doing similar things. Except those |
| 8 | | who have decided they wanted to do Medicine or Law. |
| 9 | | Then those, quite a few, went for NUS. |
| | | (Gabriel, from Singapore, UCL, ¹⁰ 24 June 2014) |

10. Some acronyms for universities attended by selected informants:

UCL – University College London; NUS – National University of Singapore; NTU – Nanyang Technological University (in Singapore); SMU – Singapore Management University.

Bay described a similar situation amongst his peer groups in class, and the school football team.

Extract 2.

- 1 Luke: How about your classmates, your friends around you?
2 Generally, what were their aspirations?
3 Bay: I think a lot of the soccer guys [those in the school
4 Football team], the Singaporean guys, they want to go
5 overseas. A lot of them apply. **Ok, there are two types.**
6 **One is they will stay in Singapore and do Medicine.**
7 **Then the other is to go overseas to do Medicine or do**
8 **whatever.**
(Bay, from Vietnam, NUS Engineering, 10 Sept 2014)

Like Gabriel, Bay makes the claim in Extract 2 that the conventional aspiration in St Thomas' was to head overseas or to read Medicine locally. In response to my question, Bay suggests that there are generally "two types" (line 5), people who want to remain in Singapore to read Medicine, and people who want to go overseas (lines 6–8).

The moral stance of a preferred trajectory

This is not to say that the conventional aspiration of heading to the US/UK or of reading Medicine or Law locally were the only educational pathways considered by my informants. When describing their own aspirations, the conventional aspiration was often framed as the preferable path. This can be seen in Xavier's comments below (Extract 3).

Extract 3.

- 1 Luke: Did you talk to your parents about where you wanted
2 to go?
3 Xavier: Yeah I said "hey I'm going to private
4 schools, I'm going to apply for scholarships. I know
5 you guys can't pay, and I'm not going to ask you to pay.
6 I'm just going to try my luck, **if I get a scholarship,**
7 **good**
8 **for me I'll go, if not I'll just go to NUS or NTU".** I
9 think was pretty clear with them, even though my
10 mum was going to sell the house, and we are going to
11 pay for you right now. First of all, even if you sell the
12 house, the money is not going to be enough to cover
13 three years of tuition. Secondly, I wouldn't let you do it
14 because I wouldn't be enjoying my life as a college
15 student knowing that my parents sacrificed all these
things for me so I can just be here, I wouldn't be happy

16 doing what I would be doing. Third, it's not a wise
 17 choice right? I mean, I know people here in the US who
 18 have gone into hundreds of thousands of dollars of
 19 debt to go to college, and I don't feel it's the wisest
 20 choice you can make. **Singapore was the safety option,**
 21 **it was the safety net. If I don't get anything from**
 22 **Britain or the US, then I'll fall back on NUS or NTU.**
 (Xavier, from China, Swarthmore College, 21 June 2014)

Prior to this, Xavier had just described how he managed to gain admission to Swarthmore College in the US at the same time as most of his peers were applying to universities in the US and UK. When I asked if he spoke to his parents about his aspirations, Xavier responds by shifting into a performance of what he said to his parents (lines 3–7). Within this performance, Xavier positions himself as favouring the trajectory to the US and UK on the condition that he gets a scholarship (line 6), using “I’ll just go to” (line 7) to signal that NUS and NTU are secondary options. He then elaborates on why he does not wish his parents to pay for his overseas education (lines 8–20). He ends his account by framing the trajectory of remaining in Singapore as a “safety net” (line 21), echoing his previous statement in line 7 that NUS and NTU are secondary or “fall back” options (line 22). Xavier’s framing of his possible educational pathways may therefore be seen as a form of evaluation (Thompson & Hunston 2005: 5), where universities in the US and UK are preferred to NUS and NTU in Singapore, provided one could earn a scholarship. This discursive move is an act of stance-taking as Xavier positioned himself vis-à-vis possible educational pathways and preferred a particular track. In the sense that this act of stance-taking reflects “a disposition towards what is good or valuable and how one ought to live in the world” (Ochs & Capps 2002: 45), it may be perceived as reflecting a moral stance.

As exemplified by Xavier in Extract 3, the lack of financial support was the commonly cited reason amongst informants who had thought of going overseas for why they eventually remained in Singapore (in both life history interviews and peer group discussion).¹¹ For my informants, the educational pathway to the US and UK was often discursively conceived as the better option compared to remaining in Singapore, unless one wanted to read Medicine or Law locally. This is before financial considerations and the (un)availability of scholarships constrained their (both Singaporeans and immigrants) eventual trajectories. In all, 19 out of

11. Yang (2016b) also notes how financial considerations were one of the foremost factors preventing his ‘SM2’ (students recruited via Singapore state scholarships from China at the end of senior middle school) informants from moving abroad after their A Levels.

20 informants¹² in life history interviews portrayed the moral stance that they preferred the conventional aspiration.

Recall that statistically, 40% of students (out of 1250) in each cohort of St Thomas’ are offered a place to study overseas (though presumably not all will accept the offer for various reasons), while another 200 to 300¹³ (about 20% of each cohort) go on to read Medicine or Law in Singapore. This means that about 50% of graduates do not achieve this aspiration. The sizeable proportion of St Thomas’ graduates who do not achieve the conventional aspiration is also reflected in my informants’ trajectories summarised below.

Table 1. Summary of informant trajectories

	Informants in life history interviews	Informants in peer group discussion
Number who went to the US/UK	10	3
Number who remained in Singapore to read Medicine/Law	1	5
Number who did not embark on the conventional aspiration	9 (including one informant who did not prefer conventional aspiration)	3
Total	20	11

In the next section, I show how there is a key difference between the accounts of informants who attained the conventional aspiration and those who did not.

A difference in the accounts of informants with diverging trajectories

In comparing the accounts of informants who attained the conventional aspiration and those who did not, I found that none of the 10 informants who went overseas and the one individual who remained to read Law actually offered an explanation for why they did so, until I explicitly asked six of them about it.¹⁴ At the same time,

12. The exception was Chang, an informant from China. She did apply to universities in the UK and was accepted by Cambridge to read Math. She decided to remain in Singapore, not due to financial constraints, but to pursue her interest in Chinese Orchestral music.

13. This is based on an estimate that half of all Medicine and Law students in Singapore each year are from St Thomas’ as stated by the school’s brochure. There are about 600 places to read Medicine and Law in Singapore universities each year (National University of Singapore website, Singapore Management University website).

14. By August 2014 in the data collection process, I had begun noticing a pattern in my life history interviews with informants. That is, informants who did not attain the conventional

among the nine informants who did not attain the conventional aspiration, eight gave accounts that justified their resultant trajectories (the exception was the sole informant who did not prefer the conventional aspiration). Three out of the same nine informants told anecdotes of how they had to justify their current trajectories to others. Such ways of telling were unsolicited during the interview, and were voluntarily proffered in their accounts. I provide examples below.

Justifying their trajectories

Phey and Bay were the only two informants (out of 20 life history interviews) who did not apply to overseas universities, even if they did consider leaving Singapore.

Extract 4.

- 1 Luke: So when did you start thinking about what to do after
 2 the A Levels? Can you describe it chronologically?
 3 Phey: In Year 3 and Year 4 [in St Thomas'], **actually**
 4 **initially I**
 5 **wanted to go to the US, to explore a different**
 6 **environment. But only if I got scholarship.** Then in
 7 Year 5 and Year 6 I found out that getting a
 8 scholarship to the US is quite hard. Cos I see a lot of
 9 seniors, the previous batch, also study here for four
 10 years, then go US. So we thought, ah, that should be
 11 the way. But actually no. Those guys are really good
 12 [academically] and they have the financial ability, so
 13 they can actually move on to the US. **But a lot of my**
 14 **batch actually cannot, cos no finance,** so if no
 15 scholarship then no choice, stay here. When I come to
 16 the end of Year 5, when I do research, I feel that
 17 actually very hard to get [a scholarship to go
 18 overseas]. And also must invest a lot in SATs, take
 19 SATs then every [US university] application costs 90
 20 dollars. One of my friends who got a scholarship to the
 21 US, he applied for 17 schools. It means the fixed cost
 22 itself is a lot. Then if you don't get [accepted], then
 23 how? So I think there's no point. **Singapore is already**
 24 **very good.** You go to US and get a lower [ranked]
 25 school than Singapore also pointless. So I didn't apply
 at all."

(Phey, from Vietnam, SMU Accounting, 28 June 2014)

aspiration tended to explain their current trajectories, while those on the preferred track did not do so. I made a conscious decision to start asking some informants on the preferred track to explain their decision (Fieldnotes 27 August 2014: 6).

In Extract 4, Phey begins with a chronological description of his decision-making process. Like Xavier in Extract 3, Phey takes in Extract 4 the stance that he would have preferred to go overseas, on the condition that he won a scholarship (lines 3–5). Crucially, Phey's account develops to include elements that appear to be a justification of his choice to remain in Singapore. We see this when Phey says "But a lot of my batch actually cannot, cos no finance" (lines 12–13), before going on to say why he did not apply to go overseas. In other words, what begins as a chronological narrative of events in response to my question in lines 1–2 shifts into a justification for why he did not go overseas. Also significant is how Phey's justification does not negatively evaluate the trajectory of heading to the US and UK. His critique of the track was about the costs of applications, not the track itself (lines 17–22). Instead, he defends Singapore's education system by stating that "Singapore is already very good" in terms of the education it offers (lines 22–23). We see the same shift from describing a sequence of events to a justification of his educational pathway in Bay's account in Extract 5.

Extract 5.

- 1 Luke: Can you tell me when you started thinking about life
 2 after the A Levels?
 3 Bay: One day after A Div [the inter-school football
 4 competition that ended in May in Year Six], I had a
 5 serious thought about it, I kind of listed out the pros
 6 and cons, and talked to my parents, should I apply
 7 overseas? They tell me it's up to me, they will support
 8 me all the way. If I need the financial assistance they
 9 will try to help me also. So after a while I decided to
 10 not even apply overseas. I didn't even take SATs back
 11 then. I just want to stay in Singapore, get another
 12 scholarship, then get a bond and work here. I'll work
 13 here, serve my bond first, then think and see how next
 14 time. **Because** firstly, Singapore is accessible to
 15 Vietnam. It's like 2 hours, 3 hours flight. If I want to
 16 visit my parents, it's easy and it's less expensive
 17 compared to anywhere else in the world. And
 18 secondly, I'm used to Singapore already. After four
 19 years I think I'm used to the transport system, the
 20 weather, the people. So going away is another
 21 environment I have to adapt to. And I'm not the type
 22 of person who will adapt damn quickly to the
 23 environment. **I kind of chose the safe option to stay in**
 24 **Singapore.** And the important factor is the ease of
 25 getting a scholarship. Cos if I go overseas, it's not like
 26 I'll confirm get a scholarship. **But staying in Singapore**
 27 **is ok, as long as my results are good, it's fine."**
 (Bay, from Vietnam, NUS Engineering, 10 Sept 2014)

Bay begins by describing a sequence of events that included speaking with his parents (lines 3–14). Like Xavier (Extract 3), Bay raises in Extract 5 the issue of finances in this process (lines 8–9]. He uses “Because” (line 14) to mark a shift from the chronological description of events to his list of reasons for not heading overseas. Besides the availability of scholarships and a lack of finances mentioned by other informants, Bay talks about the proximity to his parents and family in Vietnam as a key factor in his decision. In line with how Xavier assessed Singapore as a “fall back” in Extract 3 (line 22], Bay, in Extract 5, frames Singapore as a “safe option” (lines 23–24) where scholarships are more readily available (lines 24–26]. Like Phey, he defends Singapore by saying that, “staying in Singapore is ok, as long as my results are good, it’s fine” (lines 26–27).

Both Phey’s and Bay’s accounts thus include a notable discursive move where a description of events shifts into a justification of their educational pathways. This discursive move might connote a deeper evaluation of these educational pathways. That is, the deployment of the discursive move (of explanation and defense) might be construed as an act of stance-taking that indirectly indicates their attitudes toward remaining in Singapore.

It must also be emphasised that the accounts of justification instantiated by Phey in Extract 4 and Bay, in Extract 5, are not solicited. While the development of the narrative is guided by my initial questioning, the shift from describing a sequence of events to justification of their resultant trajectory is not triggered by interaction with the interviewer, and is therefore more a reflexive action on my informants’ part and less an emergent property from co-construction or contestation with the interlocutor (me). The fact is that all eight informants, who preferred the conventional aspiration but did not embark on it, independently produced similar discursive moves of justification. It offers compelling evidence that there must be some underlying factor structuring their narratives in such a way. I suggest that such a stance can be better apprehended when we consider other patterns in these accounts, when informants who deviated from the conventional aspiration told anecdotes of being questioned about their trajectories, and when informants who embarked on the conventional aspiration did not produce such shifts in discourse.

Telling anecdotes of how others questioned their trajectory

In addition to the above forms of telling, three informants in life history interviews (Phey, Quentin and Chang) who did not embark on the conventional aspiration also told of how they were questioned by peers about their educational pathway in their current universities. The first example of such discourse is from Quentin (Extract 6). He had recounted chronologically how he was to enroll in the School of Design and Engineering in NUS. Quentin’s response included the excerpt below.

Extract 6.

1 Then NUS people they have this stereotype, SDE [School
 2 of Design and Environment] people are the rejects. The A
 3 Level rejects. Like my A levels grades is 3 As and 2 Bs right,
 4 but their requirement is like 3 Bs and 2 Cs. Low requirement. So
 5 obviously those who cannot get into anything else they have to
 6 go there. Then for me it's like, I have a choice. I made the choice
 7 to go there. So they like, sometimes people just ask me, they
 8 always ask me the same question "**oh are you from St**
 9 **Thomas'? Oh you are from St Thomas'? oh then why? Why**
 10 **did you go to SDE?**" [laughs] I said I choose to go there, not
 11 because I have to go there.

(Quentin, from Vietnam, NUS Design and Environment, 25 Aug 2014)

The second example is from a focus group discussion with 11 members of the peer group that I was embedded in for my research. Prior to what occurred in Extract 7, we were discussing the issue of choosing universities, and how many students in St Thomas' seemed to have the same aspiration. Both Wayne and John are Singaporeans who remained in Singapore. John had previously revealed in the same discussion that he was unable to go overseas as he did not win a scholarship.

Extract 7.

1 Luke: So do you all agree that in St Thomas', amongst
 2 yourselves and your friends, you have this mindset of
 3 going overseas, or taking Law or Medicine?
 4 Wayne: It's not what we think, it's what other people
 5 think. Like when I go for orientation all that, then
 6 other people, "**eh? From St Thomas'? Why never go**
 7 **Law? Why you come SMU business?**" I don't like. I
 8 just don't like.
 9 John: **Yeah like I'm the one of the very rare people in NUS**
 10 **Mechanical, rare St Thomas' guys. So they will be like**
 11 **"oh my god why are you here in Mechanical**
 12 **Engineering?"** yeah things like that. Then they will ask
 13 "Your A levels fucked up?", then I, "No I got 5As", then
 14 I don't want elaborate so much. But yeah it's partly like
 15 you already got a good grade for A levels, so you are
 16 thinking you want to try and use the good grades for A
 17 Levels. Cos for me I have to go back to Mech Engine, so
 18 like I go back to ground level again and I need to fight
 19 again with the rest. If you already got a good grade for A
 20 levels why don't you get a better course? So you sort of
 21 start ahead of the rest, continue being ahead. Yeah, but
 22 after some time, I one year inside already, I also like
 23 used to it. (Discussion with peer group, 3 Aug 2014)

The contexts in which Quentin, and Wayne and John told their anecdotes (of how peers questioned their choice of trajectory) are actually different. Quentin told

the anecdote while recounting his experience in NUS, while Wayne's and John's anecdotes were told in order to demonstrate Wayne's point that "other people" (Extract 7, lines 4–5) seem to have a certain presumption about graduates from St Thomas'. Despite these differences in context, it does show that at least five informants who deviated from the conventional aspiration (three from life history interviews and two from the peer group discussion) shared these experiences of having to justify their trajectory to others.¹⁵

For Quentin, Wayne and John, the basis for why they were asked these questions is the same – their status as graduates of St Thomas' and a perceived mismatch with their current educational trajectory. This is seen in the foregrounding of and explicit reference to St Thomas' when they recounted the questions that were posed to them. All three anecdotes were told through a shift into performance, when the questioning by their peers were dramatised. In Extract 6 (line 8), Quentin's account of the anecdote begins with "oh you are from St Thomas'?" Also, Wayne's recollection of the question starts with "eh? From St Thomas' ah?" (Extract 7, line 6). In the same way, John begins his anecdote by foregrounding how he is one of the "rare" people in NUS Mechanical Engineering who had graduated from St Thomas' (Extract 7, lines 9–10), before saying how it leads to questioning by his peers i.e. "So they will be like, 'oh my god why are you here in Mechanical Engineering?'" (lines 10–12). Quentin, Wayne and John hence clearly associate their status as graduates of St Thomas' with these experiences of being questioned about their trajectories.

In contrast, when speaking with the 10 informants who went to the US and UK, and the one individual who studied Law locally, any explanation for why they did so was not voluntarily forthcoming.

Absence of explanation for those who embarked on the conventional aspiration

I was only able to gain the information by deciding to explicitly ask for it with six informants. An example is Andy's response in Extract 8. In the preceding three minutes, Andy was describing in chronological fashion how he decided to read Engineering in UCL, leading up to this point in the conversation. Note also the same conventional aspiration he described as being prevalent amongst his peers in St Thomas' (lines 3–14).

15. My informants' accounts of having their trajectory questioned, resonated with me during the data collection process. I, too, remained in Singapore for my undergraduate studies after my A Levels, choosing to enroll in NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and was asked the same questions by some peers.

Extract 8.

- 1 Luke: How did your aspirations compare with your friends
2 in school?
- 3 Andy: Most of my friends would try to go overseas. Like
4 Henry and Gin, both of them are very interested in
5 going to the US. Somehow they ended up in Singapore,
6 I'm not really sure why, maybe because they didn't get
7 enough of financial aid. For the Singaporeans, during
8 lunch and stuff we actually talk, and they said they
9 want to go to the US mostly. And some of them they'd
10 try to go to Oxbridge. Like XXX, he went to Brown, and
11 some of my friends in my class, mostly they went to
12 the US. I think many of them aspire to go abroad,
13 instead of staying in Singapore, like about one third of
14 the class maybe.
- 15 Luke: So why did you think so many, like you, thought in the
16 same way?
- 17 Andy: I think firstly, because of the [university] ranking? So
18 even though NUS is ranked quite high, and NTU¹⁶ as
19 well, most of the top in the ranking table are from US
20 or UK. So many of them want to go to the US to have
21 better education, in the sense of ranking. I think it's
22 the most obvious factor. And then secondly, because
23 when you hear your seniors and the older people, they
24 say studying in the US is better, they teach a lot of stuff
25 and the life there, then you feel an aspiration to
26 experience those kind of things as well. So it's about
27 hearing the experience, and you yourself wanting to
28 feel the same thing and experience the same thing.
29 And then thirdly I think is about experiencing another
30 culture abroad. I think because travelling abroad and
31 living by yourself independently, it's kind of a symbol
32 to show that you are a grownup, and you can take care
33 of yourself and be independent. You don't need your
34 parents to cook for you and those kind of thing.

(Andy, from Vietnam, UCL, 3 Sept 2014)

Andy responds to my question by referring to Henry and Gin first (line 4) as examples of “most” of his friends (line 3), both of whom are Vietnamese scholars like himself. He then shifts his description to “Singaporeans” (line 7). It is only on further prompting (lines 15–16) that Andy gives reasons for why students in St Thomas’ conventionally want to go overseas.

We can perhaps begin to understand these patterns in my informants’ accounts when we consider them as related rather than disparate features. I have

16. NUS is ranked 22nd in the world and 1st in Asia in the 2014/15 QS rankings (QS website). NTU is ranked 39th in the world and 4th in Asia in the 2014/15 QS rankings (QS website).

argued that my informants' discursive shift from narrating a sequence of events to justifying their resultant educational pathway can be seen as an act of stance-taking connoting a deeper evaluation of the trajectory they have undertaken. Within this same set of informants who did not embark on the conventional aspiration, individuals also told anecdotes that they had to justify their trajectory to others because of their status as graduates from St Thomas'. On the other hand, all informants who went overseas and the one who read Law locally did not explain the rationale for their decision unless I asked them explicitly. The reasons for conforming to the conventionally-aspired track seem to be taken for granted, without need for justification.

This difference might be attributed to the fact that I am an insider of St Thomas', since my informants know that I was both a former student and teacher there. It could be that informants on the conventionally-aspired track assumed that I would know why they chose that path, and saw no need to tell me. But this is insufficient to explain why informants who did not embark on the conventional aspiration consistently felt compelled to justify their decision, or told anecdotes of having to justify it to others.

It is therefore not unreasonable to infer that my informants' discourse of justification, as acts of stance-taking, reflect a moral stance that they are expected or ought to conform to the conventional aspiration in St Thomas' School. There is a certain normativity associated with this track, against which their life choices are perceived to be judged. This is partially validated by Extract 7 (lines 4–5), when Wayne specifically states that, "it's not what we think, it's what other people think." This stance does not necessarily emanate from interaction with me, and is perhaps conditioned by a combination of other social experiences (such as Quentin's, Wayne's and John's when questioned by their peers). It is this stance that produces the discourse of justification or anecdotes of justification seen in Extracts 4, 5, 6 and 7.

My informants' moral stance toward the conventional aspiration in St Thomas' is thus not only a preferred option for 19 out of 20 of them. For informants who have not attained it, the trajectory of heading to the US/UK or to read Medicine/Law locally is also a pathway that they feel an expectation to conform to. Insofar as my informants' moral stance with regard to their trajectory is consistently and independently produced across 20 individual informants in interviews, and in discussion with a peer group, I suggest that the moral stance is collectively shared by graduates from St Thomas'. It is now worth coming back to Bourdieu's work, with a focus on the connections of stance-taking to the social field.

Connecting acts of stance-taking to the social field through Bourdieu

As aforementioned, within a paradigm of reflexivity, acts of stance-taking are to be seen as “indirect indices” of the broader sociocultural field (Jaffe 2009: 13). But what and how exactly do we render these connections? Examining my informants’ collective moral stance through the lens of Bourdieu will perhaps allow us to see the relationship between their stance-taking and the social field more clearly, as well as better understand why they hold such a moral stance.

My data suggests three points of convergence with Bourdieu’s theorisations: (i) the consistent moral stance toward the conventional aspiration and trajectory points to stable orientations and ways of acting, and hence a *habitus*; (ii) the discourse of justification amongst those who deviated from the ideal indexes their elite social position as graduates of St Thomas’ within a field of education in Singapore; (iii) my informants’ stated sensibility of why they prefer heading to the US and UK reflects a tacit valuation of transnational mobility and attending top-ranked schools as forms of cultural capital in a competitive field.

In his introductory notes as editor to Bourdieu’s (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*, Thompson (1991: 14) expresses the view that Bourdieu actually uses different terms to refer to social contexts or fields of individual action: “...‘field’ (*champ*) is his preferred technical term, but the terms ‘market’ and ‘game’ are also commonly used, in ways that are at least partly metaphorical.”¹⁷ Thompson also sets out what he believes to be how Bourdieu defines a field:

A field or market may be seen as a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or ‘capital’... A field is always the site of struggles in which individuals seek to maintain or alter the distribution of the forms of capital specific to it.
(Thompson 1991: 14)

Hanks (2005) offers a similar take, where,

a field is a form of social organization with two main aspects: (a) a configuration of social roles, agent positions, and the structures they fit into and (b) the historical process in which those positions are actually taken up, occupied by actors (individual or collective).
(Hanks 2005: 72)

An example of a field is secondary education in Singapore, where there are positions such as teacher and student. The field itself can be understood as constituted by key actors (my informants), institutions (elite schools like St Thomas’), practices

17. Warde (2004: 15) corroborates the interchangeability of these metaphors used by Bourdieu as explicatory concepts.

(the trajectory of enrolling in universities in the US and UK) and discourses (how my informants talk about their trajectories) (Noble 2013: 352).

Regarding Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Hanks (2005) adopts a practice-centred approach, and suggests that it may be addressed in the form of habituated practices:

At base, habitus concerns reproduction insofar as what it explains are the regularities immanent in practice. It explains regularity by reference to the social embedding of the actor, the fact that actors are socially formed with relatively stable orientations and ways of acting. (Hanks 2005: 69)

Ergo, my informants' consistent moral stance toward a conventional aspiration and preferred trajectory in Extracts 1, 2 and 3, and the concomitant acts of stance-taking demonstrate how they possess relatively "stable orientations and ways of acting". Given optimal circumstances, especially without financial constraints, 19 out of 20 life history interviewees would have taken up the pathway of university education in the US and UK. Additionally, those who did not embark on the preferred track arguably portrayed the moral stance that they perceived an expectation to do so. When we consider my informants' collective orientations and acts of stance-taking, as well as how historically 50% of each graduating cohort from St Thomas' regularly embark on the conventionally-aspired trajectory, these suggest a shared habitus among them.

Moreover, to Hanks (2005: 73), practices such as speaking and the production of discourse are indicators of how individuals take up social positions within the field:

Social positions give rise to embodied dispositions. To sustain engagement in a field is to be shaped, at least potentially, by the positions one occupies. The speaker who produces discourse in a field like the academy comes to be shaped by the positions (s)he takes up and the forms of discourse they call forth.

(Hanks 2005: 73)

The discourse and anecdotal accounts of justification regularly produced by informants who did not embark on the conventional aspiration might reflect both their moral stance and their specific social position as graduates of an elite secondary school in a stratified field of education. Their perception that they are expected to conform to a trajectory might partially be explained by their position as academically elite students in Singapore. This, in turn, leads to the production of the type of discourse we have seen (Extracts 4, 5, 6 and 7) that indexes their said social position and moral stance. This is also an instantiation of what Gee (2005: 120) calls, the "reciprocity between language and context" (i.e. reflexivity), where language both reflects context and constructs it to be a certain way.

Finally, there is a consistent cultural logic that underpins my informants' actual trajectory, and moral stance surrounding the trajectory. We see a certain valuation attached to the conventionally-aspired trajectory. This valuation is stated in terms of university rankings and accruing experience in foreign cultures when Andy, in Extract 8 (lines 17–34), responds to my question of why so many students in St Thomas' share the same aspiration. John's responses in Extract 7 give us greater insight to this sensibility. To John, the value of his A Level grades lies in enabling him to attend more prestigious courses of study that allow him to "continue being ahead" (line 21). Conversely, reading Mechanical Engineering in Singapore, as he is doing now, means that he has to "go back to ground level again and... need to fight again with the rest" (lines 18–19). In other words, John is formulating his academic achievements and course of study as forms of capital in competition with his peers. In Bourdieu's (1986: 248) terms, John's valuation of his A Levels and university qualifications might be termed cultural capital, allowing John to compare himself with his peers, to exchange them as John has done by substituting his A Levels for a university degree, and to potentially convert it into economic capital upon entering the workforce.

To Noble (2013: 352), it is the individuals' participation in the activities of a field and hence implied commitment to the values of capitals (i.e. Bourdieu's notion of *illusio*), that "maps" the field's borders. That is, a field can be roughly defined by the practices of individuals that demonstrate recognition of the value of certain resources, and differentiation of social positions by acquiring these resources. It is a space where the 'game' is operationalised. Importantly, this means that individuals such as John, who have not achieved the conventional aspiration, but yet continue to defer to the value of the trajectory, can be seen as operating in the same field as those who have attained it.

In tacitly accepting their academic qualifications and choice of university as forms of cultural capital, my informants signal their concomitant participation in a competitive field of education. In having graduated from St Thomas', my informants are positioned as academic elites in this field where secondary schools are highly stratified. They also perceive an expectation that they ought to conform to certain educational pathways associated with their social position. All of these – the tacit valuation of cultural capitals, the acknowledgement of their position in a field – are linked to my informants' eventual educational pathways and moral stance when talking about their trajectories.

Implications for the government

In relating my informant's practices to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, we gain a better understanding of how their moral stance toward their aspirations and eventual trajectories might be linked to the education system that they have been socialised into. It is St Thomas' position at the top of Singapore's stratified education system that provides the conditions under which both stance and trajectory are produced and reproduced amongst my informants and students in St Thomas'.

This poses a challenge to the Ministry of Education in Singapore, which in recent years has attempted to curb elitism in the education system. The Ministry of Education's official ranking of secondary schools, originally introduced in 1992, was phased out in 2004. This was replaced by a broader table that banded schools according to their performance in the O Levels, and achievements in sports and the performing arts. This banding was also phased out in 2012 (Ministry of Education 2012). The Ministry had acknowledged how the PSLE and entry into top-ranked schools that offer the IP has generated much stress amongst parents and students. There were calls to abolish the PSLE (Chia & Toh 2012), and the government has responded by changing PSLE results from a raw score to grades.¹⁸ These initiatives have been coupled with the Ministry's promotion of the idea that "every school is a good school" (Ministry of Education website c), implying that one does not have to attend a top-ranked school for quality education. Despite these efforts, my contention is that the habitus of students from St Thomas' – that directly reflects elitism in the system – will persist into the foreseeable future. This is for two reasons.

First, the structure of stratification appears unlikely to be changed, as the state still sees value in neoliberal principles of competition and performativity in the education system. Speaking on the issue of the PSLE and competitive entry into secondary schools, the Prime Minister had this to say:

I think it is good that parents compare between schools, because it puts pressure on schools to know parents are watching, and it makes a difference how they perform but it is important that parents compare and contrast, choose [schools] on the right basis... If we have a completely flat and featureless system, every school is exactly the same as every other school, no difference, we will have not excellence but mediocrity. (PM Lee Hsien Loong in Ng J. Y. 2013)

Second, the education system is itself intertwined with how the state manages talent and selects individuals for key roles in the civil service and political office.

18. Announced on 13 July 2016, the PSLE results will now consist of eight levels of achievement for each subject reflecting the performance of each student, rather than a score derived in comparison with his/her peers (Ministry of Education 2016).

The state offers undergraduate scholarships to citizens, and these scholarships are a matter of intense competition and prestige. Scholarship-holders are legally “bonded” to serve in specific bureaucratic organs upon completion of their undergraduate degrees. K. P. Tan (2008) gives an overview of these government scholarships as an integral part of what he describes as an elitist system of talent management:

Through a very thorough process of high-powered interviews and written tests, scholars with the ‘right’ thinking, attitude, and character are selected from a pool of candidates with top examination results and notable extracurricular achievements. These scholarships are among the most tangible of meritocratic instruments in Singapore. The most prestigious scholars pursue degrees in well-known overseas universities and their subsequent contribution to society is secured mainly through a legal-contractual obligation (known as a ‘bond’) to work in a public-sector body... The government is expected to provide scholars who have returned with rewarding and challenging careers, particularly in the elite Administrative Service. (K. P. Tan 2008: 17)

Scholars are often fast-tracked into key civil service positions compared to their contemporaries without scholarships. Those in key civil service positions are, in turn, often co-opted into the ruling People’s Action Party as members and future Members of Parliament. Of the 18 MPs in Singapore’s cabinet in 2014, nine of them were awarded government scholarships, including the Prime Minister. The office and status of bureaucratic leadership in Singapore are therefore legitimised by the meritocratic and elitist education system.

Conclusion

This paper has presented academically elite students in Singapore as a case study. The way in which my informants talk about their educational trajectories is argued to be a consistent moral stance, and hence collective habitus, tied to their social position in the local education system. While I do not dispute Archer’s (2010, 2012) claims of increasing “contextual incongruity” in late-modern societies, my findings do show the continued relevance of notions like habitus in specific contexts.

In characterising the political economies of China and Southeast Asia, Ong (2007) describes how political power remains concentrated in the hands of the state, while principles of neo-liberalism are unevenly but strategically applied across various arms of government. This picture of “neo-liberalism as exception” (Ong 2006: 3, 2007: 5) appears particularly apt when applied to the education systems in Singapore, China and Vietnam, where “neo-liberal thinking is directed toward the promotion of educated and self-managing citizens who can compete

in global knowledge markets” (Ong 2007: 6). At the same time, we must also see these “self-managing citizens” as operating in a context where there is a global war within higher education for attracting talented students (P. T. Ng 2013), and where Singapore is at pains to harness the advantages that globalisation might bring through its education and population policies (Koh 2010). Consequently, the social field of my informants might be theorised as a transnational regime of education linking nations such as China and Vietnam through a hub that is Singapore, to the US and UK.

In Singapore, it is “neo-liberal thinking” (Ong 2007: 6) that drives the state’s persistent adherence to competition and stratification in the secondary school landscape. Elitism and the habitus of students from St Thomas’ School thus appear likely to endure, as long as the overarching political structure and economy remain unchanged.

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