

**Title:**

Her majesty the student: marketised higher education and the narcissistic (dis)satisfactions of the student-consumer

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# **Her majesty the student: marketised higher education and the narcissistic**

## **(dis)satisfactions of the student-consumer**

### **Abstract**

Intensifying marketisation across higher education (HE) in England continues to generate critical commentary on the potentially devastating consequences of market logic for pedagogy. In this paper, we consider the student-consumer prominent in these debates as a contested yet under-analysed entity. In contrast to the dominance of *homo economicus* discursively constructed in policy, we offer a psychoanalytically-informed interpretation of undergraduate student narratives, in an educational culture in which the student is positioned as sovereign consumer. We report findings drawn from in-depth interviews that sought to investigate students' experiences of choice within their university experience. Our critical interpretation shows how market ideology in an HE context amplifies the expression of deeper narcissistic desires and aggressive instincts that appear to underpin some of the student 'satisfaction' and 'dissatisfaction' so crucial to the contemporary marketised HE institution. Our analysis suggests that narcissistic gratifications and frustrations may lie at the root of the damage to pedagogy inflicted by unreflective neoliberal agendas.

### **Keywords**

Marketisation, narcissism, pedagogy, satisfaction, student as consumer, student experience

## **Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged in the field of higher education (HE) scholarship, that the role and purpose of the British university is being remodelled by marketisation. The student-consumer stands as a powerful icon in these debates, not only in news media, but also in government policy and senior management discourse. Now in an era of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), there is little sign of marketization abating; the uncapping of undergraduate student numbers in 2015, and the proposed rise in the fee cap of £9000 for 'high rating' HEIs (Adams 2015), represent the latest moves to intensify marketization by the UK government that started in the 1980s (Blackmore 2009; Brown and Carasso 2013). Though these reforms are intended to increase accountability, responsiveness, and the quality of educational offerings for an expanded rather than elite HE sector, scholars from a range of disciplines have detailed the threat marketisation poses to the fundamental purposes, values and ideals of a truly 'higher' education (see for example, Boden and Epstein 2006; Lynch 2006; Marginson 1997; Naidoo and Williams 2015; Natale and Doran 2012; Potts 2005; Ritzer 1998, and also student comment e.g. Afolabi and Stockwell 2012).

Despite this, there remains little empirical research on the impact of changes wrought by marketisation, particularly at the level of the student and their experience. Even in a growing and theoretically rich body of critical work, the student-consumer is often theorised in the abstract rather than empirically analysed. Existing empirical research with students, mainly from business schools and other vocational disciplines, appears to confirm these concerns about the impact of market subjectivities on pedagogy, such as the dominance of a conservative and instrumental rationality to learning, a lack of critical perspective, the subordination of socio-economic inequities to individual monetised returns, and anti-

scholarly sentiment (Nixon, Scullion, and Molesworth 2011; Varman, Saha, and Skalen 2011).

One research stream within this scholarship has sought alternative subject positions to the consumer identity for students of HE. Here we see debates regarding the possibilities of the student interpellated not as a passive consumer but as an active *customer* (Barnett 2011); *citizen* (Svensson and Wood 2007); *co-producer* (McCulloch 2009); or in the counter-hegemonic role of *producer* (Neary and Winn 2009). Some of this educational research readily aligns itself with a popular and ostensibly empowering marketing discourse of ‘value co-creation’ (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000) in which students can bring their capabilities and assets into the learning encounter by constructing the consumer as a *co-creator* (Kalafatis and Ledden 2013; Naidoo, Shankar, and Veer 2011; Ng and Forbes 2009). However, many young people enter the HE environment with little awareness of alternative roles available for them as students and understand HE primarily as a commodity they must possess to access a consumer life by obtaining a well-paid job (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). For the marketised HEI, the satisfaction of these undergraduate students with the ‘service offering’ becomes crucial, an organisational reality driving growing scholarly interest in student dissatisfaction and complaint behaviour in HE internationally (Dolinsky 1994; Webb and Jagun 1997; Alves and Raposo 2006; Hart and Coates 2010).

In this paper, we offer a critical interpretation of interview data from undergraduates in which we are not concerned with identifying the ‘right ingredients’ for the Holy Grail of student satisfaction, or with criticising students as if they were to blame for the marketisation of HE. Rather we seek to examine their narratives as symptomatic of irrational instincts and socio-psychodynamic processes in order to illuminate deeper meanings in an educational culture that is increasingly marketised. We therefore attend closely to the feelings and fantasies implicit within student narratives that emerged as an unexpected aspect of our

fieldwork on pedagogic choice. In this, we are inspired by critical management scholar Peter Svensson's (2014) work on *over-interpretation* as a way to produce critical and reflexive accounts of organisational life that expose layers of soft power that are effective precisely because they are naturalized, internalized and embedded in social relations. Our empirical analysis reveals a darker side of the student constructed as sovereign consumer, as one driven less by the other-denying self-interest inherent in the image of a student-consumer as *homo economicus* but by an other-abasing self-love inherent in the narcissist (see Cluley and Dunne 2012) cultivated through the dominance of neoliberal student subjectivities. Our central argument then is that intensifying marketisation heightens the potential for consumer satisfactions and frustrations in HE that are profoundly narcissistic in character, and that this may lie at the root of the damage to learning inflicted by marketisation.

In the following sections, we first reflect on the various mechanisms and practices that establish a discursive norm of the particular worldviews and behaviours of a sovereign consumer for the student in marketised HE as it operates in the UK HE sector. We then outline Sigmund Freud's (1914/2001) conceptualization of narcissism and its subsequent development and application to consumer cultures to provide the conceptual framework. We find that our informants' narratives not only reveal the ease and fluency with which they talk as consumers of HE but that this subject position also heightens narcissistic satisfactions that threaten the quality of 'higher' learning in relationship with tutors, at the same time as increasing the likelihood of dissatisfaction caused by the assaults of a massified and marketised HE sector on students' inflated need to feel special.

### **Student satisfaction as sovereign**

The idea of the student at the very heart of HE's purpose is not only discursively instantiated and constituted in policy following the Browne Review (2010) but (re)produced in structural institutional mechanisms and subtle yet powerful cultural practices of staff and students. In the increasingly neo-liberal culture characterising contemporary Britain, the state seeks to create the individual on the model of consumer and entrepreneur (Brown 2006), through discourses and practices that have been argued to now pervade HE with the proliferation of work placements, internships, and university departments devoted to developing enterprising and entrepreneurial students (Allen et al. 2013; Olssen and Peters 2005).

Though the student as consumer is one possible position among many, it is the student-consumer as a rational economic actor that resides in UK government proposals to require universities to publish more and more detail about individual courses (Gearatrix 2011; Johansen et al. 2015). This economic discourse provides the broader scaffold for sector-wide acceptance that funds follow student choice of HE institution which, in effect, privileges the least experienced and the yet to be learned. In such a sector, the value system of lightly regulated economics based on student-consumer choice supersedes the plurality of the political and the intellectual as an end in itself. Given the hegemonic power of student satisfaction as sovereign, it is perhaps not too surprising to see a largely uncritical and depoliticised literature investigating student satisfaction that primarily takes a service marketing logic (see for example Athiyaman 1997; DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak 2005; Douglas, Douglas, and Barnes 2006; McCullough and Gremler 2002; Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014). In this work, the student-as-consumer is assumed to be a largely utility-maximising rational economic actor, assumptions that have been robustly criticised as reductionist (at best) in psychology and sociology which, unsurprisingly, continue to wither under empirical examination in international HE contexts (see Hesketh and Knight 1999;

Tavares and Cardoso 2013). Predicated on the HE sector operating *within* consumer culture, and recast as a service provider, the notion of individualised choice is central.

In the UK, signifiers of the student's sovereign status as 'chooser' are abundant. Many HE institutions now engage in fierce competition for students, expend large promotional and marketing budgets, erect iconic buildings for aesthetic pleasure, and exhibit an insatiable desire for growth in student numbers (Adams and Smith 2014). We see universities seeking to kite mark and gain external accreditation from several organisations in an effort to gain meaningful differentiation through positioning statements (Chapleo 2010). An increasing audit culture in HE proclaims to all stakeholders that what matters most is measurable outputs, devaluing the university as an independent space for thinking (Evans 2005; Öhman 2012). As a result, institutional league table positions caused by decimal point fluctuations are celebrated (or cause mild panic), outsourcing becomes normalized, student friendly spaces - aesthetics for young people - and simplified information are afforded more budget than books and staff accommodation (Olssen and Peters 2005; Radcliffe 2015). Additional market mechanisms such as student charters, the institutionalization of complaints procedures and university compliance with consumer law reveal heightened student ability to trigger quality review (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Smithers 2015), some of which are also used as marketing tools to both attract new customers and shape the expectations of existing ones in relation to satisfaction and quality (Aldridge and Rowley 1998). The increasing prevalence of these mechanisms reveals a sector-wide valorization of the student consumer, their service experience and their satisfaction (Alvesson 2013).

Marketisation enshrines the *satisfaction* of the sovereign student as a legitimate and central imperative of the HEI. It increases the pressure to be seen to be responsive to student desires, wants and 'needs', despite the ancient insight that seeking the learner's satisfaction extinguishes more enduring intellectual development engendered through challenge, struggle

and problem-solving (see Furedi 2011). This encourages an emphasis on clear concrete outcomes, at the expense of what might necessarily be an unpredictable process if transformative experiences are to emerge (Blackmore 2009; Conklin, Kyle, and Robertson 2013). Rather than the pursuit of knowledge and learning through a ‘three-cornered conversation’ between students, tutors and the object of enquiry (Nixon 1996, 11), so-called quality logics propel student satisfaction measurement mania in which scores are endlessly sought, captured, codified and used to assist staff performance management. As ‘frontline service workers’, many academics have become accustomed to having to consider ‘how the student body might react’ to teaching style and substance, to shrug off grade-grubbing, to retain students and prioritise their contentment. Subtle practices such as ensuring regulations are ‘fair’ (i.e. in favour) of students in assessment, talking students ‘up’ at exam boards, and an acceptance of grade inflation reveal increasingly asymmetrical power relations (as hypothesised by Gross and Hogler 2005). Less subtle practices such as inviting student representatives to join university executive meetings, and HEI marketing campaigns with headlines such as ‘you said it, we did it’, further indicate HEIs’ intentions to demonstrate where sovereignty resides.

In this paper we are interested in understanding what such practices mean for pedagogy through an interpretation of the affective dimension of students’ narratives. To do this, we aim for a critical, rather than ostensibly sensible or moderate account and thus we turn to the conceptual tools afforded by psychoanalytic theory.

### **Narcissism and consumer culture**

In contrast to the satisfaction of conscious needs, psychoanalysis awards a major role to the gratification of irrational instincts and unconscious inner conflicts as the key to human



motivation. Psychoanalysis thus approaches even seemingly rational acts, such as choice of university or module, as often driven by powerful feelings and emotions that are intertwined with desire and pleasure. In education, psychoanalytic approaches have exposed the prevalence and intensity of transference in the college context (e.g. Robertson 1999) as well as illuminating the importance of a 'fundamental lack' for learning to be empowering and emancipatory, as it is from this state that deep desires (to address this sense of lacking) are generated (Driver 2010, 561). Psychoanalytic concepts have also been highly influential in compelling social analyses of consumer cultures (e.g. Bauman 2007; Bowlby 1993; Dichter 1960; Fromm 1976; Lasch 1979).

The malleability of the concept of narcissism means it defies easy summary. Freud (1914/2001, 73-4) conceived of narcissism in terms of the distribution of sexual energy (libido) of the subject, positing that all people direct some of their sexual interest towards themselves rather than the external world, and that narcissism is, to some degree, quite 'normal'. Totally dependent on the (m)other from the beginning, primary narcissism is that which occurs in the earliest part of human life when, for most infants, care-givers can recreate something of the oceanic contentment of the womb in which there is no awareness of separation between a child's self and the external world; 'the period of our infancy when we imagined ourselves the centre of a loving and admiring world' (Gabriel and Lang 2006, 90). Secondary narcissism – which can be overcome through the course of development – is an extreme magnification of primary narcissism (Freud 1914/2001, 75) when all libidinal interest is withdrawn from other people and things in the outside world and directed towards the ego, which is adopted as the pre-eminent object of love. In adults, if the development process goes awry, this form of regression gives rise to various megalomaniac characteristics, including a grandiose 'over-estimation of the power of their wishes and mental acts' (75). Since the expression of narcissistic desires is typically socially unacceptable, defence

mechanisms such as identification and denial are deployed that allow them some (albeit distorted) expression. Freud hints at the necessary repression of narcissistic desire and its subsequent emergence in his observation of affectionate parental attitudes towards their child:

it is a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism...The child shall have a better time than his parents...renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation – ‘His Majesty the Baby’.

(Freud 1914/2001: 91)

Importantly, narcissism is also seen as a cultural phenomenon with social ramifications, helping to explain the self-enjoyment, image-obsession, new forms of media reinforcing self-centeredness, and entitlement characteristic of consumer societies (Gabriel and Lang 2006; Marcuse 1964) in which many HEIs are embedded. Lasch (1979, 151), who even then observed the dangers of commoditising higher education, argued that material affluence led, in part, to the dominance of a narcissistic personality type rooted in a bottled-up rage against love objects. Lasch’s recognition of the aggression within consumer pleasure precedes more recent analyses of the destructive, sadistic aspects underpinning consumer excess (see Fitchett 2002; Patsiaouras, Fitchett, and Davies 2015). In this view, narcissism has helped illuminate the satisfactions afforded by the consumption of commodities that are only heightened for the consumer by their knowledge of the deprivation and suffering of others in the production process (Cluley and Dunne 2012). In clinical psychology, socio-cultural changes and a subsequent rise in individualism have been recognised as engendering increased narcissistic traits among college students (Twenge and Foster 2010).

In psychoanalytic readings, narcissism also involves a deep sense of emptiness and inferiority which vacillates with a grandiose self-image (Kohut 1971, 1977; Lasch 1979). For Alvesson (2013), HE is one institution permeated by the logic of grandiosity - inflamed by the status-enhancing ideals of consumer culture - in which practices such as grade inflation and the upgrading of job titles on a large scale feed narcissistic fantasies. Yet, for the individual, this only exacerbates the sense of vulnerability and heightens the need for confirmation later on:

Grandiose projects contribute to a fragile and hollow confirmation of identity.

Completion of a demanding education and achieving high grade or promotion as a result of protracted efforts may build character and stabilize identity, but performing such feats without any substance in the form of learning, achievement, or demonstration of ability has no such durable effect. (Alvesson 2013, 215)

Similarly, Gabriel (2015a) argues that the consumerist freedom offered through personal choice - and we note the increasing provision of choice opportunities for students in HE too - compensates for a felt lack of control, fulfilling a narcissistic function in offering us opportunities to enhance our self-image and elevate ourselves above others around us. Flowing from this structural prioritising of students' personal choices, risk becomes a 'matter of individual responsibility and navigation' (Elliot 2002, 305). In the HE context this passing on of responsibility may serve to heighten risk aversion in students' pedagogic choices, avoiding intellectual challenges that could damage their ego. In this paper we argue that in constructing 'student consumers', marketised HE encourages types of student satisfaction that are neither politically neutral nor benevolent whilst also defusing the potency of transformative learning experiences.

## **Method**

Our data is from a qualitative investigation of students' experiences of choice within their degree course, especially but not exclusively their choice of module. One of the authors conducted 22 interviews with full-time undergraduates at a research-intensive university in England. The interviews lasted from 50-120 minutes totalling approximately 28 hours of recorded data (see Table 1 for participant details). The interviewer was not a member of teaching staff and was not previously known to the interviewees in order to reduce the limitations associated with social desirability bias. We conducted depth interviews to glean highly detailed accounts of specific experiences in order to go beyond abstract opinions and rationalisations that can lead to impoverished data (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Depth interviews emphasise the gleaning of interviewee's own understandings of lived experiences in as rich and holistic a manner as possible, and therefore direct and abstract questions such as 'why did you choose those modules?', 'do you think you gain value for money?' or even 'what do you think about tuition fees?' were avoided in favour of a descriptive line of questioning that sought to elicit stories about specific lived examples (such as 'how did you go about choosing that module?') and the use of probing ('can you tell me about a specific time when you felt like that? What happened?'). The interviews thus covered a range of topics around the informant's experience of university life, usually starting with biographic details, how they came to be at university studying their course and modules, as well as significant incidents and future plans. Students were recruited via posters placed on campus noticeboards and within halls of residence as well as from a flyer drop in residential areas with a high student population. We were particularly keen to access participants beyond those who regularly engage with university life such as student representatives, since these students represent a minority of the student

body and may limit the diversity of experiences we sought to elicit. Similarly, we also sought to interview students studying a range of subjects within the faculty (social science) to enrich potential variation within the data.

All the interviews were transcribed in full and the authors independently examined similarities, differences and inconsistencies within each interview, and then collaborated to build holistic themes across the dataset. However, rather than a sole focus on iteratively coding positive observations, our analysis is informed by traditional psychoanalytic interpretive techniques that emphasise the appreciation and significance of minor details, including pauses and silences, to reach issues not immediately implicit in surface responses.. As critical interpreters we also looked for clues - the inadvertent little gestures by which the informant 'gives himself away' (Wind 1963 cited Ginzburg 1980, 8; also see Inglis 2010) in what Ricoeur (1970, 32) refers to as the systematic 'exercise of suspicion' and then sought to detect additional signs, symptoms, fantasies or similar to corroborate or contradict the interpretation. In this vein, we are informed by both the critical management approach advocated by Svensson (2014) in offering an *over-interpretation* of empirical material that seeks to transcend the students' own perceptions and interpretations in order to patterns of meaning that may not be readily accessible to participants themselves, and also by the interpretive turn in social science that acknowledges the value of knowledge claims that do not seek objectivity (see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015). All names and identifying details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[Table 1 near here]

**Narcissism in marketised higher education**

In the following sections, we first illustrate our informants' discursive production of themselves as paying customers as the core socio-cultural identity for students. We then use psychoanalytic theory to expose the narcissistic nature of our informants' descriptions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their HE experience. We purport that students' narcissism, which is particularly amplified in consumer societies, is damaged by an expanding massified sector. This anxiety calls forth defence mechanisms including fantasies of self-sufficiency as well as the search for sources of gratification that expose exploitative impulses in students' relationships with others. We find that market mechanisms in the HE domain appear to elicit and reward student narcissism via the valorisation of demand that stems from infantile anxieties. This in turn heightens the likelihood of impoverished opportunities for learning experiences for students; the unreflective promulgation of neoliberal ideology that privileges private, economic value; and exploitative interpersonal relations with members of teaching staff, who become framed as objects of pleasure.

### ***The preoccupation with the self as an omniscient consumer***

Consistent with emerging empirical research, we found an overwhelming prevalence of a consumer subjectivity. This was most obvious in students' fluency in discursively constructing themselves as paying customers, the degree qualification as a passport to a 'better job' divorced from a learning experience, the prevalence of campus myths such as the monetary cost of each lecture to the individual student (apparently £35 an hour), the unquestioned priority of self-enjoyment, and an all-pervasive sense that the university exists to ensure they fulfil their desires. The notion of HE as a commercial transaction between the university as service provider and the student as the already omniscient consumer was viewed as natural and self-obvious, in which personal choice is believed to be a fundamental right:

I don't understand courses which don't give choice, like because there is a chance students won't enjoy certain things, like different students like different things and you've got to give them the choice...because remember we're paying £9,000 a year which is a lot of money, you can't force something down them which they might not be interested in...Give them a choice and let them learn what they really want. (Dilip)

Some scholars interpret a consumer subject position as an example of an agentic student subjectivity in line with a liberal humanist discourse in which students 'front up to lecturers as "equals" rather than 'a position of relative weakness: as child, subordinate, supplicant, initiate, rebel, or devotee' (Grant 1997, 103). In contrast, our analysis revealed a widespread passive sense of scholarly agency among students demonstrated by a belief in a causal link between a tutor's ability to deliver content in an entertaining style and high marks on student assessment (and vice versa). This was coupled with a view that spoon-feeding is expected and challenging tasks are unacceptable; that there is an unconquerable distance from the chosen discipline; and that tuition fees are primarily a payment for lecture handouts, contact time and the degree certificate rather than their learning experience.

I'm paying £9,000, so that's £3,000 a term, of which the last term was what, two weeks of teaching. And this year I turned up to two lectures and two seminars per module, so I don't even want to think about the maths of that...We are paying a lot of money for very little... I hate [having to do compulsory modules]...Second and third year I don't think you should do it at all...At the moment I think I paid £9,000 for a year of *PowerPoints* and seminars. (Richard)

The HE experience was commonly understood as a temporary lifestyle choice before a 'real life' of fulltime employment; an experience in which learning and development did not reside *alongside* the historic meaning of university life as a first taste of freedom and independence for young people, but was decentred by a preoccupation with prioritising one's pleasure. This is an excerpt from our interview with Emily:

I didn't choose [that module] because it's Wednesday at 4[pm] and Wednesdays are generally the day off. If it's you know 5 o'clock in the evening I think, you know, no, no, I'm not doing that, it's too late. Thursday and Friday I have one hour a day and I'm more likely to miss those lectures because I don't have to go in...I have better things to do than come into Uni and go back...I don't know, yeah. *And what are those better things to do?* Oh see friends, go to the cinema, like I went to a concert the other day so I missed something... it's also the effort of coming into Uni, you know, it's the half an hour cycle in [laughs] Just for an hour; no I don't want to go in for an hour.

For our informants it was axiomatic that personal goals should be prioritized but these goals were not formed from a rational appraisal of any transformation required by them or the skills needed for an anticipated future job role; they tended to be of an instant and hedonistic nature. In the following story, Katie is open in her refusal to learn for the sake of learning and exemplifies an instrumentalism and ideal of easy credential acquisition that several students also expressed:

A lot of work that's not worth very much is the worst combination ever... We were on a field trip and we had to do this thing...and I said to [the lecturer] 'I don't understand why mine's gone wrong, like I've followed all the steps'. And he said



‘Oh, you’ll have to redo it’ and I was like ‘Oh, what? I’ve been here for two hours...Is this marked?’ and he was like ‘No’ and I was like ‘Oh, well I’m not doing it then’. And he said ‘With that attitude you should just go home now’ and I was like ‘I’m in the Lake District, I’m not going anywhere, I’m physically stuck here’. To me if it’s not marked and I hate it, I’m just not going to do it, I might as well turn my attention to something where it’s credited...So I just like whatever, I don’t need to do it, it isn’t important to me.

When her instrumentalism is challenged by the tutor – seemingly an act of resistance on his part – the threat to Katie’s narcissism triggers the defence mechanism of denial (‘it isn’t important to me’). Yet, as we will show, organizational imperatives to satisfy students helps elicit, reward and perpetuate the kind of passive consumer subject position Katie is reproducing, one that is already more likely than alternatives such as the trainee scholar, citizen or even skilled practitioner.

### ***‘Dissatisfaction’ as narcissistic damage***

The marketised HEI, in being compelled to compete in a marketplace and respond to sovereign students’ demands, raises expectations and risks making false promises. What is missed in celebratory discourses of marketisation is the widely recognised fact that markets in consumer cultures do not run on the satisfaction of an individual’s innate needs but rather thrive on dissatisfaction and the creation of desire in which being a unique individual through the freedom of choice is raised above all other values (Bauman 2007). It is therefore not surprising that across the dataset our informants described incidents of intense dissatisfaction when entering a mass HE sector and encountering a reality that is not the idealised fantasy shaped and potentially intensified by university promotional communications. In the next

excerpt, Mark describes the blow to his narcissistic fantasies of fame and glory caused by the realisation of an external world seemingly indifferent to his wishes:

It was like the build-up to university and there was so much hope and like I could do whatever I wanted and change as much as I needed to. And then slowly it died. I don't know if it was the same with you but everyone comes to university with this big ambition of I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, I'm going to change the world. And then after a couple of weeks you think 'what's the point?' I'm just this lonely undergrad; what am I going to do?...Fresher's week; you meet everyone and no-one at the same time. The same conversation over and over again, 'Where are you from? What are you studying? Where are you from? What are you studying?' And then after a couple of weeks just forget it, you're left with maybe like five people, but I'm fine with that, that's all you need really.

Mark's description includes several narcissistic traits that appear to be intensified by understanding HE as primarily a consumption experience, in which advances in intellectuality, the possibility of transformation through challenge, and expectations of extended effort are absent as potential sources of narcissistic gratification (see Freud 1939, 115). The narcissistic satisfactions gleaned from his initial illusions of an omnipotent grandiose self at university ('I'm going to change the world') are extinguished by the painful realisation of his ordinariness as one among many hundreds of students, prompting a subjective experience of meaningless and inner emptiness characteristic of narcissism ('what's the point...I'm just this lonely undergrad'), a superficiality he then appears to project on to other students he meets ('everyone and no-one'). His statement reveals disenchantment with personal relations and a subjective experience of abandonment ('you're left with...'), prompting an anxiety he seeks to defend himself against with rationalization

(‘but it’s all you need really’). This passage also suggests that Mark sees even these friendships in non-reciprocal, instrumental terms of what he stands to gain from them.

For several of our informants, the requirement to understand and engage with taxing material also inflicted considerable pain to student-consumers’ narcissistic fantasies. As Freud postulated, this appeared to prompt disidentification and the creation of an ego-ideal which, for several of our informants, seemed to be a fairly vague notion of a future self that they sought to confirm rather than challenge. In accordance with previous investigations of student discourses (e.g. Wetherell, Stiven, and Potter 1987), many of our informants discursively constructed a split between theory and practice; for our informants this was expressed in an ideal where HE should replicate ‘real world’ practice inside academia. As this excerpt from Adam’s interview illustrates, a discourse Lasch (1979, 149) termed ‘the slogan of relevance’ reveals a shared consumerist belief that HE should exist to serve his pre-existing whims and feed his self-aggrandizement:

I’m finding I don’t have a lot of tolerance for the whole academic side of it. I don’t like talking about methods, I don’t like talking about existentialism or constructivism or all these kind of theories that have no relevance to the real world. The modules that I’ve enjoyed the most, that I’ve done the best in have been ones that...studied the actual mechanics of government, like...things that have relevance to real things. Rather than basically looking at Marxism or feminism or realism or constructivism. And for me it lacked the thing that makes me want to do politics. It lacked the real world connection, it lacked the kind of relatability to normal life. And I kind of felt that the academics loved it because they’re academics and they enjoy these kind of grand ivory tower ideals but I see myself as much more grounded in the real world. I see myself as someone that is doing a degree as a means to an end not as an end in

itself. I do a degree because I want to get a better job. I don't do a degree because I have an academic thirst... The academics don't realise that in a time when you're paying a lot of money for a degree a lot of people are doing it because that's how you get a good job. They assume perhaps, somewhat naively I think, that everybody wants to be an academic and they assume that everybody just loves doing it, just loves all the nitty-gritty theory stuff that they enjoy because they love it... The choice [of module] is based on what the academic wants to teach not what the students want to learn.

Seeing the only valid purpose of a degree as the personal (largely economic) benefits of a 'better job', Adam's expression of dissatisfaction, indeed resentment, suggests the threat of challenging material and associated feelings of inadequacy to his narcissism. Adam's wished-for fantasy of himself as a noble figure tackling 'real world' problems in 'normal life' (and being paid for it) is forged in opposition to academics whose apparently passionate teaching is recast as a rather self-indulgent, antiquated activity in which irrelevant pet theories are inflicted on a cohort of largely instrumental students. This excerpt also reflects the myth of the 'unproductive scholar' fed by accounting imperatives (Mountz et al. 2015, 7) that was expressed by other informants. As Lasch (1979) argued, such a call for real-world relevance is at odds with the horizon-broadening purpose of education itself, and indicates an inability or unwillingness to take an interest in issues beyond immediate experience, a reflection of the implicit (and not so implicit) valorisation of student satisfaction within the marketised university. This passage is also highly suggestive of transference and Oedipal relations; Adam's contempt for authority figures unable or unwilling to gratify his desires unconsciously represent the parental authority, strengthening his wish not necessarily just to replace (rather than identify with) the parent but demean them to show himself superior (Freud 1933/1973; Klein 1945).

Whilst highly practical modules that were closely linked to current affairs, industry practices, students' own business ideas or seen as 'Dragon's Den style', tended to feed the students' narcissism by confirming an ego-ideal (as Raj put it, 'how life as an entrepreneur could potentially be'), the imaginative opportunities offered by more intellectually demanding courses prompted anxiety that triggered rationalisations. Teaching material that was deemed 'unrealistic', or overly abstract and inapplicable to 'the real world' was thus 'unnecessary' to teach. Our informants' narratives revealed the absence of value attributed to a scholarly identity but also tended to illustrate an ultra-utilitarian conception of knowledge consistent with neoliberal ideology in which the prioritisation of economic values is taken for granted.

### ***Infantile anxieties and fantasies of self-sufficiency***

Since our informants conceived of themselves as passing through HE, implicitly expecting the fairly easy and painless accumulation of enough credits to access a well-paid job, the possibility of the kinds of meanings and behaviours that characterise alternative student subjectivities of producer or co-creator were almost entirely absent. Rather we heard stories that suggest the presence of defence mechanisms triggered by the painful realisation of dependence on tutors who frustrate and disappoint, that appeared to prompt fantasies, not of status-enhancing scholarly collaboration, but of a self-sufficiency in which the isolated individual succeeds on their own. This fantasy was implicit in several narratives, in which the interaction and support of others was made absent. Twelve week courses were seen as equivalent to reading a book on holiday or watching *YouTube* videos, whilst student-led discussions were seen as 'a waste of time...because we don't know anything' (Sarah). In the following excerpt, John appears to identify with the especially gifted fictional character played by Matt Damon in the film *Good Will Hunting*:

About five lectures [in] I was like I'm not enjoying my time here, I'm just going to leave the lectures and I'm just going to teach it all myself. So I went down that route...A couple of my friends did say that 'Oh yeah, we see you're skiving lectures now' and I thought.. I feel that's quite an immature way of looking at it. Because my view is that you're not paying £9,000 for the teaching, you're paying £9,000 for the degree, well you're paying £27,000 for the degree at the end. Have you seen the film *Good Will Hunting*? That's exactly the view I take. I think that if anyone wants it that much you could check out a couple of books from the library. And to be honest you don't even need the library anymore, most of my books are e-books and I get them online for free. So if you really wanted to learn for the sake of learning then you know, go and do that. But obviously that's not a sustainable view as well...everyone demands that you need something to prove and that's the degree. You're not paying for the teaching. Because you could honestly do it yourself...I did a lot of it myself to be honest...I was just watching *YouTube* videos...of other people explaining it, which sounds really stupid considering I'm paying £9,000 for some guy to explain it to me.

Construing tutors primarily as content dispensers paid by students to make material easy to digest and lectures 'enjoyable', the failure of the tutor to respond to John's needs – whilst seeming to meet the needs of others – triggers a defensive fantasy of himself as the self-sufficient, enterprising, individualistic character, indeed the unrecognised mathematics genius of the protagonist, which suggests as Lasch (1979, 242) puts it, 'an attempt to recover the lost illusion of self-sufficiency which denies the need for others at all'.<sup>1</sup>

When the marketised HEI responds to student consumers' primal feelings of pain caused by assaults on students' narcissism – by reducing intellectual demands or over-

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<sup>1</sup> This is of course a delusion as the film actually centres on portraying the considerable care and support of an academic and a psychotherapist in helping the protagonist fulfil his potential.

generous marking for example (or both) – this serves to restore, at least temporarily, something of the students’ feelings of omnipotence experienced in the state of primary narcissism. Yet it also makes it increasingly difficult for students to develop personally as well as intellectually in learning to accept life with limits. Across the dataset, the ostensibly positive experiences of HE that our informants shared with us illustrated a student satisfaction that was profoundly narcissistic in nature, as demonstrated particularly clearly in this excerpt from Jessica’s interview:

[My School] had this module on the History and Philosophy of Geography and I was like ah no! I’m not ready for that, I can’t do another whole like where it’s come from and the ideologies behind it and so on. It just wasn’t interesting to me. So theoretical, just nothing...And thank God they scrapped it because apparently every year, every student has been like ‘this was the worst module ever, I hated it, I did really badly, please get rid of it’. *So the School responded?* Finally got rid of it, thank God. They’re pretty good, my School, at like responding to things, like they’ve started recording lectures. They’ve got open-door policy now which is the best thing. Every professor has it...I just knocked on [my lecturer’s] door the other day, just wanted a five-minute meeting, normally you’d have to arrange for that in his office hours where probably thousands of other people want to see him. And I was like ‘This is what I want to do for my essay, is this right? Am I ticking the right boxes?’ And he was like ‘Yeah, sounds good, focus on your dissertation, don’t stress yourself out’. Brilliant, done, dusted, fine.

For psychoanalysts, all infants experience a profound anxiety of being deprived in the early stages of childhood, anxieties that can later resurface in adult life and especially in interpersonal relationships where one is dependent on the expertise of another, such as teaching (Gabriel 2015b). In Klein’s (1987) development of Freudian psychoanalysis, the

pain of the realisation that one is dependent on forces external to themselves produces an immense rage in the infant against those who fail to respond to their needs or appear to have abandoned them (see Klein 1987). , Later in life the emergence of these unconscious anxieties can trigger off defences in the form of fantasies that seek to restore the primal illusion of omnipotence and self-sufficiency (Lasch 1979). Jessica's excerpt above, in contrast to the verbal aggression towards academics in Adam's interview and John's fantasies of omnipotence, reveals the unconscious narcissistic gratification afforded by university practices that confirm the self as the pre-eminent object of love. University practices that ensure almost total accessibility and availability not only of lecture recordings and library resources but also of teaching staff, effectively reduce each to a commodity to be used for personal enhancement, enacting a managerialist discourse in which the instant gratification of the sovereign student's every wish has become the central mission of the marketised university. In doing so, such practices appear to feed feelings of omnipotence among students that entrench the ideology of the individual as the centre of the universe and may well exacerbate students' inner emptiness in the future (see Alvesson 2013). In this way, 'best practice' in a marketised HEI – a legitimate authority with a duty of care to its students and a responsibility for facilitating their intellectual and moral development – is to respond to students' demands elicited by the conscious or unconscious pain of damage to their narcissism, whilst simultaneously passing responsibility for learning to those who see the payment of fees as having absolved them from involvement in their own learning experience.

### *The tutor as 'love object'*

Not only did several of our informants experience a mass HE sector as a blow to their narcissism, its commodification - signified by tuition fees - also appeared to devalue the HE



experience. As Gabriel (2015a) has noted, this weakens HE's potential to gratify narcissistic desires of superiority by gaining status-enhancing social and cultural capital. The profaned nature of massified, marketised HE appeared to lead some of our informants to seek alternative, more immediate, sources of satisfaction. Whilst our informants discursively constructed themselves as consumers of HE, some paradoxically also repudiated the transactional relationship between students and tutors such a metaphor implies; they wanted to be far more than a university's customers, and we saw this most clearly in our informants' unconscious ideal of a wished-for love relationship with their tutors.

Like parents, lecturers have a double nature to their students; they can provide pleasure and gratification, though their capacity is not unlimited, and inflict pain and suffering in their role as judge and disciplinarian. For psychoanalysts, anxieties that are likely to emerge in adult pedagogic relationships, which often prompt feelings of vulnerability, originate in the painful realisation that as infants we are totally dependent on an external love object who is capable of both satisfying and frustrating our needs and desires. For Klein this is extremely difficult knowledge for the child to accept leading to a defence mechanism known as splitting. Across the dataset, our informants tended to criticize tutors as indifferent objects of frustration or idealise tutors as caring objects of pleasure.

Whilst a heightened desire for attention has long been associated with the narcissistic traits of 'Generation Y' (Twenge and Campbell 2009), we noticed a more intense desire for intimacy with tutors that suggested the transference of parental images and thus core unconscious fantasies of love objects. As Newton (2002) observes, the student as consumer metaphor symbolises the transformation of a helping relationship in which the student feels the tutor has their best interests at heart, to one in which the tutor's ultimate motivation for interacting with students is to secure high satisfaction scores. This may lead both students and lecturers to adopt what Barnett (2011, 48) calls an 'extractive stance' in which neither engage

in the pedagogic encounter as an end in itself. Our informants described a desire for closeness to their tutors, though less through prolonged scholarly enquiry and collaborative effort, but primarily through sociality. 'Good' lecturers were likeable, funny and entertaining people you could 'go for a beer with' outside the formal pedagogic relationship centred on the discipline. In the following extract, Samuel admits to 'insane' envy of a friend who appears to have found a place of special affection in the heart of a teacher, and the anger prompted when his tutor, symbolic of the primal (m)other, fails to gratify his desire for admiration:

I have a friend who's at Princeton [University] in America and I'm insanely jealous of him. He at one point emailed his professor...She like invited him to come round, see me in my office and that kind of stuff, showed him this website she was working on...And told him like keep an eye on it, it would be great if you worked on it. And he just got thrown in but it was a wonderful experience. So it's that sort of professors wanting to mould their students and not just teach them and sort of wanting to actually interact voluntarily...The feeling I get is...they're only teaching you because they have to. And what I want is that feeling of like yeah, it's my job but, you know, I genuinely give a toss about what you end up doing. And if you're interested then I will genuinely help you, I will find you great things...I think the students who do make that extra effort should be really, really encouraged and rewarded for it rather than sort of made to feel like you're a nuisance. Like this sort of mosquito buzzing round them. It's like, don't pretend you're a fantastic professor if you can't be bothered to have any sort of interaction with your students outside of the course.

For Samuel, the impersonality of a contractual interaction between the tutor and thousands of student-consumers inflicts a blow to his narcissistic desire for uniqueness. His dissatisfaction reveals a wished-for intimacy in which the possibility of a reciprocal relationship is

marginalised by Samuel's framing of tutors as objects of desire to be used for one's personal gain ('I will find *you* great things'). His friend's narcissistic pleasure from supposed intimacy with his lecturer ('come round, see me in my office') is experienced as a threat to Samuel's own self-love and ability to succeed, so that fellow students are cast as rivals. Seen as the primal other, this passage is also suggestive of an unconscious fantasy of reunion with the tutor who can restore his narcissism by rewarding him primarily for who he is and not (only) for what he has achieved ('professors [should] want to mould their students...and want to interact voluntarily...outside of the course').

Following Freudian psychoanalytic theory, unconsciously envisioning lecturers as parental substitutes is likely to arouse contradictory feelings such as loyalty and suspicion simultaneously in students, and we also saw this in our data. Collaborative student projects with external businesses were seen as 'exploiting our labour' (William) while Sarah was suspicious that her tutor sets student presentations based on reading in seminars 'because she doesn't want to talk about the reading herself'. But psychoanalytic theory also emphasises the aggressive and destructive impulses behind narcissistic desire: 'The greedy infant may enjoy whatever he receives for the time being; but as soon as the gratification has gone, he becomes dissatisfied and is driven to exploit' (Desmond 2013, 95). This instinct can be glimpsed in Jessica's interview, in which her narcissistic satisfaction of special treatment is only heightened by the knowledge that others, in this case the tutor's spouse, are suffering as a result:

I was talking to one of my lecturers about my essay that I got back...and I only meant to drop in for 15 minutes and I was there with him talking to him for an hour and he like declined three calls from his wife, it was like 6:30[pm] at this point and he wasn't

even meant to be there. And he's so nice, he just talked the whole thing through with me...I probably should have taken more advantage of that.

Relayed as an example of a 'amazing' university experience, we see a distinctly predatory, even exploitative, unconscious fantasy within Jessica's story. Narcissistic gratification is gleaned not through academic achievement but in gaining superiority over rivals' demands for his attention; the passage reveals a patent sadistic delight, not just in having the love object but in having it at the expense of others.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our critical interpretation of student narratives has enabled us to theorise the notion of the student-consumer beyond the territory occupied by much of the prior literature in this area; a hegemonic discourse based on economic rationality and conceptions of value. By pushing beyond existing scholarly considerations of how HE needs to be responsive to a marketisation process, we offer a rich perspective on its consequences, from which student satisfaction and dissatisfaction appear as profoundly narcissistic in character. Whilst educational scholars and commentators have identified possible unintended consequences of marketisation for learning, our close analysis of empirical data contributes to emerging research on what these discourses of marketisation do, and vitally what this means for the pedagogic relationship in particular. We have argued that a marketised HE context shapes student experiences to be predicated on a highly idealised consumer sovereignty in which any 'lacking' (Driver 2010, 562) is denied, through foregrounding and attempting to satisfy the desires and wants that spring from infantile anxieties. We have shown how a consumer subject position in a UK HE context heightens the likelihood of narcissistic satisfactions and dissatisfactions through structural mechanisms and attendant discursive practices of students

that allow – at times, encourage – the adoption of the ego as uppermost love object. This threatens the quality of ‘higher’ learning on the part of the student because it indicates the failure at an unconscious level to sufficiently recognise the difference between the self and the external world. It threatens the quality of ‘higher’ education on the part of academics by implicitly attributing an omniscience to the student-consumer, extinguishing the opportunities (for both) to expose vulnerability in the trusting and mutually respectful relationships required for HE to be a public good with a moral duty (Gibbs 2001). The student-consumer is thus likely to form unrealistic expectations of both their experience and their attainment in a higher educational culture (‘if the university exists for me, I will – I should – get high marks’); unrealistic at least for the university that retains the core values, purposes and ideals of HE.

Our empirical analysis suggests there may be some darker implications of increasingly transactional and contractual pedagogic relations, for the three-cornered relationship between student, tutor and discipline through which so much of HE takes place. Tutors may be pressured to both perform (more) emotional labour – the fake smiles and managed emotional display appropriate to a service role (Hochschild 1983) – and incur a greater potential risk of exploitation in an increasingly precarious profession (Ivancheva 2015). This creates a further tension, in that emotional labour by the academic in response to narcissistic students is likely to be increasingly necessary and yet devalued in a context where only what is countable is credible (Öhman 2012). Our reading of contemporary students has shown how they desire the care of academics, whilst simultaneously needing to possess moments of accomplishment as an isolated self. As Mountz et al. (2015) argue, marginalising care feeds the myth that the autonomous individual achieves success.

What then do our findings mean for the reflective academic practitioner? Moves that may, even inadvertently, gratify narcissistic strivings to be treated as an ‘individual’, such as

personalised learning contracts, should also be considered for their effects on fundamental pedagogic principles of collective endeavour in the pursuit of knowledge as well as notions of civic culture. Though claims to any legitimate expert voice are likely to be more readily challenged by student-consumers, facilitating reflection on students' initial expectations and motivations for enrolling on a degree early on may allow for the expression and reconsideration of some of the expectations about the university experience and their attainment. Recognition that some of these may not serve them well (in stimulating the kinds of frustrations and strivings we have outlined here) may encourage more productive approaches that do not drain the university experience of intellectual enquiry or inhibit a desire to learn through challenge and with others. Irritated by what is perceived as 'neediness', educators themselves may also recognise the potential for an experience of counter-transference, their own sense of never being able to give enough to a student, that results in further distance (for both parties) from learning experiences.

The particular forms of subjectivity that are produced in HE also partially shape the kind of power, knowledge and truth that apply within the educational setting. The dominant neoliberal discourse of the student as rational economic consumer constructs the student subject as simultaneously required to make themselves, whilst heavily regulating the kinds of 'self' that can be made (see Brown 2006). For this reason we believe the oft-proposed solution of the student as co-creator misses how the value co-creation discourse may work to further legitimise marketing ideology as a core principle of social organization. Our concern is that the university that embraces a highly particular (and political) discourse of the student as co-creator, explicitly or otherwise, becomes poorly positioned to encourage critical thinking or even provide space for reflection on the problematic consequences of markets for society and the inhumane and unsustainable aspects of consumer capitalism. Indeed, whilst the spectre of the 'better job' on graduation loomed large across our dataset as the core

benefit of HE, any scepticism about the lack of such employment possibilities was entirely absent.

However, we wish to clarify that we do not seek to place the blame on students. Rather, we have argued that structural mechanisms and cultural practices operating within many HEIs work to compromise even the possibility of encouraging reflection on the student as an agentic consuming subject, so readily reproduced in wider society, because marketisation ensures HEIs are beholden to it. In fact, it is possible that such market mechanisms have seen such little resistance because they also offer a form of organizational narcissism for the university itself, providing a measure of narcissistic pleasure for university leaders when market successes such as high rankings are achieved. We recognise, however, that for many academics interested in pedagogy, our arguments make for a troubling read. They do for us. Indeed, ours is perhaps an account that may itself trigger denial ('in other schools, yes, but not here'). We also recognise the limitations of our sample drawn from one research-intensive university with a bias towards middle-class students. Not all students share the preference for easy material implied in our informants' narratives. Some students do fail, although rates are declining in the UK HE sector (Bachan 2015). However, from our analysis the student-as-consumer emerges as an ideological norm; students may claim (to academics at least) to seek challenge, whilst analysis of their stories of pedagogic choices and university life reveal rather different sources of motivation. If we are to make progress towards feasible alternatives and actions that ameliorate the most pernicious effects of marketisation we believe it important to recognise rather than shrink from the complexity of contemporary student practices and the wider cultural conditions that shape them.

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