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# Fateful aspects of aspiration among graduates in New York and Los Angeles

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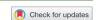School of Education, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

**ABSTRACT**

This article presents ethnographic research on the aspirations of graduates from a private university in New York City, some of whom move to Los Angeles. Findings depict financial and family pressures exerting a governing force upon the graduates' futures, often beyond their control. Focusing on the narratives of four individuals, we introduce the language of fate as a means of conceptualising the potential repercussions of aspiration and Higher Education. The premise of both is an increased determinacy over one's future, yet in the high-stakes U.S. context here examined, this financial investment and articulation of family hope may generate fated (seemingly inescapable) and/or fateful (ominous) outcomes. The dynamic of 'cruel optimism' illustrates some of the paradoxical consequences of Higher Education, whereby people may be punished by their aspirations. We discuss what factors affect differing outlooks on the future and imply alternative dimensions to adversity beyond the remit of 'inequality'.

## Introduction

Sat on a sunny balcony on the day of her graduation, Grace and two friends are taking 'selfies' on their smartphones and reflecting on their experiences of university in New York. Things have not been plain sailing, and while the group laugh as they exchange stories, they all agree on how competitive, exhausting, and sometimes disappointing their time at university has been. Fast-forward six months, in the bitterly cold New York winter, and Grace's face is worn with blemishes she attributes to the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by her upbringing and her education. Grace grew up as an only child in China before spending two years at a boarding school in Dallas, Texas, and then studying finance at a prestigious institution called Manhattan University[1] (M. U.). As a graduate, Grace embarked on an internship with an international bank though she despised the atmosphere and was fired, triggering a downward spiral of mental health problems and family issues. Grace took part in a number of lengthy interviews over the course of the research, while also going into

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therapy, using both spaces to question how to make sense of her past and what to do with her future. In doing so, she came to various realisations, such as the distance she feels from her parents and her friends: 'No wonder I feel so alone in the world. I am alone in the world.' In reconciling the pressures and uncertainties she faces, and the loneliness and anxiety which she feels, Grace was experiencing real hardship. However, according to any conventional metric of inequality, Grace is considerably advantaged. Her family had supported her financially throughout her undergraduate degree and beyond: indeed, she was funded in such a way that she was able to actively *resist* the job search which her parents had 'taken over' (they were searching for employment on her behalf). While many experiences of Higher Education (HE) may involve an expectation to future success, in Grace's case only a limited range of lucrative professions were considered a reasonable outcome. This strict regimentation of future possibilities, nurtured by her parents, sapped any excitement or mystery about the future, charging it with significant pressures. One year after her graduation, Grace emphasized how unbearable her situation had become:

> I keep on just dreaming of having a knife and killing my parents, then killing myself. Bloody apartment, and it's all over. Or taking a gun from my bedside table and shooting myself in the head.

The severity of Grace's story is extreme. The predicament, however, of feeling trapped within a prescribed life trajectory was pervasive across this 18-month study of graduates from a private university in the city of New York. The conceptual framing of the research examines how the trajectories of individual lives such as Grace's are shaped by, and interact with, educational, cultural, and socio-economic forces. Worldwide, education plays an oxymoronic role in mediating life trajectories: employed as the chief mechanism for inter-generational class reproduction, while also imagined as the most effective means of disrupting such inequality (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). Analyses of elite education such as Bourdieu's *The State Nobility* (1996) typically emphasise the manner through which power and forms of capital are passed on to a select few, to the disadvantage and exclusion of the majority. And yet, the narratives of middle-class and 'elite' graduates transnationally increasingly depict difficulties and dilemmas (e.g. Allen, 2016; Arum & Roksa, 2014; Bregnbaek, 2016; Burke, 2017). At a fundamental level, these strained transitions among the comparatively advantaged are the product of an increasingly competitive global economy, a generational shift in spending power, and a so-called 'broken promise' that HE will inevitably translate into more prosperous futures (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). Compounding these economic issues, educationally succesful graduates also face dilemmas regarding what line of work to pursue, and its classed implications (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Weeks, 2011); and existential strife attempting to clarify, and actualise, their broader desires while also satisfying the wishes of their parents (Bregnbaek, 2016).

Given the virulent conditions of inequality which exist across educational contexts, why should we care about the concerns of educationally advantaged and/or affluent university graduates? To begin with, if – as across our findings – those occupying more privileged positions represent their situations as intense or unbearable this is worthy of analysis to comprehend why, and to compare these experiences to transitions across the whole ecosystem. It is increasingly acknowledged that a focus solely on those bearing the burdens of structural disadvantage only tells part of the sociological story (e.g. Khan, 2015; Savage & Williams, 2008). Calls to study those on the other side of the spectrum can presume an essentialised world of luxury and ease which, certainly through findings from this research, is not necessarily so simple. While capital and resources play a monumental role in mediating life chances, the contingencies of these afforded opportunities may be coercive, as Deresiewicz (2014, p. 8) suggests:

'Look beneath the façade of affable confidence and seamless well-adjustment that today's elite students have learned to project, and what you often find are toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation.'

Across demographics and across the life course, little attention is paid to these negative underbellies of the championed notions of aspiration and success. Weeks (2011, p. 1) speaks of the 'overwork that characterises even the most privileged forms of employment', while economists and psychologists of well-being consistently demonstrate the complicated, and often inverse, correlation between wealth and happiness (Graham, 2012). The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the sense of being constrained to a trajectory that can occur as a consequence of people's HE participation. These dynamics are termed 'fateful' for the extent to which graduates are forced to 'lie in the bed which they have made.' It so happens that this analysis has emerged among a comparatively privileged demographic, although equivalent problems may be even more salient in other contexts. As a result, we suggest that discussion of inequality can expand to consider intersecting impediments to graduate prosperity that may exist alongside, or independent from, more blatant stratifications of opportunity.

We begin with a note about the methodology and a consideration of our use of the term 'elite' to represent these graduates. The irony of a group labelled as such going on to experience hardship is part of a broader temporality of cultural production in which life trajectories are not only generated by people's backgrounds, but also by the contingencies of their aspirations and engagements with the future (Appadurai, 2013; Irving, 2017) – as in downwards or upwards social mobility. Subsequently, we present a conceptual framing of the notions of fate and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) and relate these to current research on graduate transitions. The ensuing data section focuses on the narratives of four graduates. We organise these accounts according to three themes: the pursuit of

one's dreams (Evelyn), post-graduate study (Denise), and avenues orchestrated by parents (Grace, Stella). Across each, the amount of money borrowed or spent, and the extent of family expectation are what weigh most heavily on how graduates imagine and inhabit the future.

## Methodology

This article draws from an ethnographic study of the aspirations and transitions of graduates from a university in New York City. Thirty participants were directly involved in interviews. Data was collected by the first author between January and December 2017 and intermittently between March and December 2018, totalling eighteen months of fieldwork spread over two calendar years. In the course of interviewing the New York City participants, Los Angeles emerged as a popular destination for graduates from this university. Two visits were conducted there in August 2017 and March 2018 to track how aspirations were mapping out into reality. Nine M. U. graduates were involved in the Los Angeles component of the research, the majority of whom were trying to break into the cinematic industries. While only one of these graduates (Stella) feature in this article, it was during fieldwork in Los Angeles that the analytical trope of 'fate' occurred. All of those who had moved there carried an ominous weight of expectation, anchoring themselves to their prospective career in attempts to 'come good' on their decision.

Semi-structured interviews were found to be the most effective strategy for documenting the narratives of individual students. We followed up with participants for repeat interviews to trace how perspectives may alter in accordance with changing situations (cf. Finn, 2015; Irving, 2017). Participant observation was helpful in building rapport with participants and served as another principle data collection strategy. Ethical permission was obtained from both a home (U.K.) university and from M. U., and all participants provided informed consent for both interview and participant observation data to be published under pseudonyms. Recruitment took place through conversations with people around campus or at university events as well as through responses to posters around campus; and through snowball sampling, being introduced to participants' friends. We recruited participants from a range of situations: some transferred in to Manhattan University for the final two years of a four-year degree; some took on substantial debt, while others were entirely funded by parents; meanwhile, some students had enrolled on master's programs having conducted their first degree elsewhere.

## 'Elite' graduates

We choose to refer to this university as 'elite' due to its relational difference and symbolisation compared to other HE institutions in the same city,

country, or the rest of the world. 'Elite' is a notion that is difficult to define and is often reduced to an undifferentiated caricature of a powerful and privileged group (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017, p. 247). Khan (2015, p. 60) suggests that, 'what defines elite schools is that they have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a wide range of relevant resources.' Though this definition remains open to debate, M. U. fulfils such criteria, and trades on its brand as a global university where 'the best of the best' come together to achieve excellence. When prospective students and their parents engage in this ethos and vision, they in turn are presented with a successful image of the themselves in the future, whether intellectually, socially, or economically. Fees cost over $50,000 per year, which is high compared even with other non-public universities in the United States. While scholarships and some financial aid is available, the majority of students come from affluent, often transnational, backgrounds and/or private schooling. While not all students at this university are members of a social or economic elite by any traditional metric (for example, coming from families in the top 1% of household income), there were no students in the study who came from backgrounds of marked socio-economic disadvantage. We hence develop the argument that obstacles are not only produced from the conditions people are born into, but also through the situations which they (inadvertently) create (Irving, 2017).

## Fateful aspects of aspiration among graduates

With the above in mind, our conceptual framing of the data begins with the proposition that there is a tension between the many hypothetical lives a person could conceivably have, and the very specific life course which they end up inhabiting (Geertz, 1973; Irving, 2017). In this regard, Varenne and Koyama emphasize 'the fatefulness of culture' (2011, p. 51) – that is, the notion that culture and social structure can at once demand individual autonomy while also requiring conformity to norms, values, roles, and pathways through the life course. Matthews (1996, p. 50) similarly writes that, 'a given self is "the product of fate" in that it is shaped by the particular family and larger culture – Japanese culture, American culture – in which it has lived.' People's derivation according to culture, class, history and geography hence largely demarcate the kind of life they can expect to inhabit. And yet, the notion of aspiration and indeed, the ideology of the American Dream, assert that one needn't accept, but rather, one can *make* one's fate. The U.S. A.'s national ethos, self-styled as 'the land of opportunity', prophesises a belief that one's background needs not determine one's destiny. This notion is promoted in American education through a logic of neoliberal aspiration in which the individual person is to take all responsibility for future success and failure (Alexander, 2019). Hence, while aspiration and fate may sound like

paradoxical terms – 'aspiration' connoting agency and optimism, 'fate' implying a fatalistic sense of determinacy – they are in fact closely related. Through aspiration and HE one can influence one's life and engineer one's fate, to a certain degree. Yet this construction of new horizons may give rise to new conditions which later prove a governing force – a fate to be accepted – beyond one's control.

The following three examples from recent literature on graduate transitions represent dynamics which we would consider fateful. In the first instance, Burke's (2017) research follows Hannah and Jonny, two middle-class graduates in Northern Ireland with determined aspirations to pursue careers in acting and fiction-writing. Their commitment to their aspirations is so strong that 'no other trajectory would suffice' (p. 398). Four and six years after graduation, respectively, they are still struggling in the labour market and experience a paradox between a sense of entitlement to success and the circumscribed conditions which are available to them. Thus, the graduates live in ominous anticipation of a life which they have forever been preparing for, and which they expect to attain, but which they are unable to inhabit. Through an inversion of power, having 'chosen' this pathway, they are now subject to it. Our second example comes from Finn's (2015) longitudinal study of young women from a town in Northern England as they traverse through and beyond HE. We are introduced to Caitlin, from a middle-class family, who decides upon a career in Law following the completion of her undergraduate degree. Her delighted parents helped with rental payments and post-graduate course fees and even put a photo of Caitlin in the local newspaper when she passed the Bar. These forms of financial and emotional support made it even more difficult for Caitlin to break it to her parents how much she could not stand and wanted to leave the profession after two years. The investments, expectations, and emotional involvement of Caitlin's parents served to constrain her to a pathway which she felt hesitant, and even unable, to disavow. Meanwhile, Bregnbaek's (2016) ethnography engages with the dilemmas of students and graduates from the two most prestigious universities in Beijing. These young adults struggle and usually fail to reconcile their own desires with those of their parents and those of the Chinese state. For instance, Gu Wei, who 'like many students at Tsinghua [University], was not really interested in his major' (p. 129) pessimistically forecasts that the lack of time or fun in his youth will perpetuate *ad infinitum*: 'after graduation I know that I may make a lot of money, but I will still have no time to do the things I like. An accountant works twenty hours a day. Only death is the end of suffering' (p. 133). Here, parental expectations and the career trajectory made possible by further study have coalesced into a prestigious though unfulfilling pathway which the student half-heartedly adheres to. In Bregnbaek's study, as in Grace's account above, suicide is framed as a political act, and sometimes imagined as the only means of gaining autonomy.

These three examples parallel the three fateful dynamics in our data below: being tethered to a precarious path, being pigeonholed by specialisation, and adhering to a destiny authored from elsewhere. Our analysis of these contradictory consequences of HE participation is aided by Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism'. This dynamic posits that the contingencies of seemingly positive aspirations may also generate the very barrier to reaching those goals – or else cause significant collateral damage in the process. For Berlant, a relation of cruel optimism exists when ideals that give a sense of directionality simultaneously serve to impede prosperity. Berlant does not mean 'optimism' in the sense of high hopes or wishful thinking. Rather, she argues that all attachments have an optimistic character whereby one puts one's faith in a person, or habit, or profession. While versions of cruel optimism may occur in everyday affairs, Berlant directs the term at attachments which provide an existential foundation to people's lives and hence function as life-giving, as well as life-impeding. In each of the narratives below we identify how the dynamics of fate and cruel optimism are applicable – as unwelcome, often unforeseen, aspects of aspiration.

## Evelyn's story

Evelyn's story of going to college begins with the ideal situation of getting accepted to her first-choice university to pursue an aspiration which she and her parents had mutually formed. Evelyn is from Arizona, of 'mixed-race' (black and white) parentage. Her desire to become an actor developed from her infant years. As she put it: 'Mixed race babies are really cute. I was a really cute baby. Really cute kid. And mom put me in commercials.' These early successes on television generated an interest in the stage through dancing and then acting. The television show *Gossip Girl* inspired Evelyn's desire to move across the country to New York. Her parents fully supported these aspirations, including turning down a half scholarship to another university in order for Evelyn to attend her 'dream school.' To fund her undergraduate degree in Drama, Evelyn's parents have taken out $280,000 of loans. Further to this, Evelyn has taken out a $50,000 loan, while also spending two years as a live-in 'Residence Assistant' in lieu of paying rent. We recruited Evelyn to the study on an evening of high spirits, following a graduation boat party around the Manhattan skyline. Yet when catching up on a cold rainy evening seven months later, Evelyn's aspirations had lost the innocence they had during her adolescence. She had recently changed from working as a waitress to becoming a nanny and was pleased with this decision. However, she reflected on the incompatibility of her schedule with the performing industries – unable to 'do things between three and eight *ever* during the week.' This time commitment and the need

to keep working to fund her life in New York and to pay off loans prevented her from auditioning for acting roles, which was the very aim of her expensive degree: 'That is the big question. What would happen if I got a show?'

Ten months later, Evelyn was pleased to report that she had been in a Broadway performance – albeit unpaid. She had left the nanny job and was working again as a waitress, yet daily life was tense. Affixed to this prospective trajectory of acting, there was a substantial weight of expectation to validate her parents financial and moral support. While sat on a bench in Harlem (New York City) after attending Sunday church service together she spoke of the well-meaning pressures from her parents exerting a force on her through the phone:

> God bless them, they are so supportive – but sometimes you need to, like, 'dial back', because I can't meet these expectations. And I know that it's just love and support and well wishes, but my dad asking me every day, 'Are you famous yet? Are you on SNL[2]?' really got to me. Cos I'm not famous. I'm not on SNL. I don't really want to be.

Evelyn continued:

> The other day I called my dad and he was, like, [whispering] 'Hey what's up?' and I was, like, 'Hey, are you free? I just wanna, like, chat, I'm just walking to work.' And he was like, 'No. I'm in a meeting'. And I was, like, 'Why do you answer your phone if you're *in* a meeting. Just, like, call me back.' And he was, like, 'What, did you get a part in a movie? I just wanted to know.'

This emotionally exhausting experience for Evelyn – and it seems for her parents, too – is exacerbated by an imaginary of career success that was bought into by her attending her 'dream school', and which is maintained through her positioning in New York. The city's symbolism as an imagined community of opportunity, in which success could forever be around the corner, may serve to sustain aspirational attachments – such as Finn (2015, p. 128) conveys London for graduates in Britain. For Evelyn, the iterations of the same conversation with her father on the phone re-state the mission in mind, and implicitly remind her of her parents' financial and emotional investment.

Berlant (2011) discusses how cruel optimism often emerges through attachments to a 'cluster of promises' (p. 23). HE offers such promises, as do the fantasies of different career paths. The aspirational move of Evelyn and her parents represents an optimism which for the time being, and foreseeable future, is proving punishing. The pressure to persist in a chosen, albeit uncertain, field is common to the arts, entertainment, and cultural industries, yet the extent of money involved in Evelyn's scenario places higher stakes on the expectation to succeed. This money is yet to be earned, insinuating a dialectic in Evelyn's parents' imaginations between their pay checks and their daughter's career for years to come. At a fundamental level this narrative

speaks to the complexity of parental support which – through loans – may transcend pre-existent class positions. Evelyn does not come from a background of disadvantage, though nor are her parents in a financial position to fund her degree with money which they already have. The considerable costs of HE in the United States pose a further complication to the mobilities assumed to emanate from having an (elite) degree, especially in international comparison. Allen's (2016) work compares the effects of class position on the precarious graduate trajectories of two girls in London (UK) who attended university prior to England's 2012 increase in tuition fees. While Kirsten, from a financially comfortable background, experiences various struggles, she is able to shift gear and turn her uncertainty into a strength by taking a break, living in a family friend's holiday home in Italy, focusing on the present (painting and writing) and looking to the future in terms of travel, writing a book, and taking it as it comes (Allen, 2016, pp. 815–816). For Evelyn such flexibility is unthinkable. She is forced to try to make an immediate success of her choice of career with the shadow of the $280,000 of debt her parents have taken on in order to facilitate it. While aspiring to this goal, she is engaged in long hours of unrelated forms of employment to pay for her own loans and bills. Evelyn is committed to being ever-present and ready for an audition in New York and so is hesitant to take time off to return to see family, while she shook her head solemnly at the question of ever considering a vacation.

## Denise's story

Graduate and professional school (post-graduate study) are large industries in the United States. Through the massification of HE and subsequent 'degree inflation', a market of 'hyper credentialization' has taken root across professions. Further qualifications are required or else imagined as a means of leapfrogging a daunting or competitive labour market to a more specialised position. As graduates from families of higher means can purchase their way through these increasingly desirable qualifications, the presumed social and economic value of undergraduate study is undermined for those who have worked hard (and become indebted) to attain just the 'one degree'. Although as we see below, family class position does not necessarily correlate with the funds that parents make available to their adult children. Here we discuss the story of Denise, whose parents moved from Nigeria to Houston, Texas, where she grew up and went on to study for her undergraduate degree. After graduating, she moved back with her parents though found herself directionless, sleeping in until the afternoon. She was eventually spurred on by peers working for companies such as *Microsoft* and *Twitter*, and so she decided to do something bold and ambitious, moving to New York City to study for a Master's degree in

Race, Media and Communication. Denise was frank about her privileged upbringing: 'I had never thought so much about money until I entered grad school … And I think that's just a matter of growing up in, like, upper middle-class and always having money.' She left her undergraduate degree with $5,000 of loans, though to pay for her master's degree and rent in Brooklyn she is now in $115,000 of personal debt. Denise thus represents contrasting circumstances: on the one hand, coming from an advantaged background and yet being one of the nearly three million people in the U.S. with six-figures of student debt (Hornsby, 2018). For Denise this price-tag charged the future with a sense of foreboding that was more intense than she had bargained for:

> What am I gonna' do with this this expensive degree? This degree was expensive as hell. So I need to leave here with *a* job, with *the* job. Not just any job but *the* job that makes it all worth it. Not just financially but all the stress, I've had so many panic attacks. Emotionally, the sticker price has to be worth it.

The costs of study (emotional as well as financial) promote expectations in which ordinariness will not suffice. Rather, it has to be '*the* job' – the ideal – in order for the sacrifices to be worth it. In granting imagined access to more prestigious career trajectories, degrees may devalue and close down more ordinary avenues which may otherwise have been appealing or a source of fulfilment. The level of debt involved will have serious implications on Denise's life, work, and leisure in the future. While the qualification will improve her likelihood of a better paid position, the figure owed will keep accruing interest until it is paid off. Hence, the openness of life after her first degree – which was experienced as too loose and unstructured – has been replaced by a strict system of taxation upon her future salary. This will prevent her from accessing more than one hundred and fifteen thousand dollars which she will go on to earn; a figure that will keep on rising until the debt is eliminated. Denise reflected, 'I always think to myself: I will die before I am able to pay it off completely.' The financial repercussions of HE can cause paradoxical scenarios of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) in which the wishful thinking of the conditional tense which entices people towards further study becomes converted into an ominous social contract.

Denise recognises the impact of this debt on the kinds of better paid employment she will now have to seek – that was part of the original plan. The confluence between her future debt and expectations of future work are compounded, however, by the expectations of her family which have been satisfied and now raised through her master's degree. When we first met Denise, she chirped happily that by forty she wants to be a 'soccer mom and a professor.' In our third meeting, she discussed the extent to which her parents had taken to heart and formalised this 'general' hope for

a 'plausible' future. Denise's father had begun addressing her on the phone by the title of 'Doctor' followed by her surname. Even if Denise shrugs off this thinly veiled joke it imposes a tramline in her mind in which the idea of academia is no longer her own, but a fate which is expected of her. In our fourth meeting, two months after her master's graduation, Denise was stressed and sad to be leaving New York yet she was finding life there too financially intense. Her parents were supportive and said to come home, and so she was *en route* to Texas though did not want to stay for more than one month. Denise was not keen to embark on doctoral study at that time, though the uncertainties of what jobs to look for (and where) were laden with a pressure to construct and rationalise an alternative path with equivalent gravitas. Her master's degree has not necessarily been an unwise investment, but it has had ominous and even ossifying consequences on her options in the future.

## Grace's story continued

Our third graduate narrative returns to Grace who featured in the introduction. Grace is an only child from Shenzhen in China, whose parents are captivated by the idea of her working in finance in the United States. At age sixteen she was sent to a boarding school in Texas to improve her chances of university admittance and she is now required to remain alone in the U.S. to be eligible for a 'green card' visa. Since being fired from her internship Grace has experienced time in unprecedented ways and reflected that it was the first period of her life in which she has felt able to actually *think*. Her previous 'aspirations', she realised, were not driven by an intrinsic interest in finance, or even life in America. Rather, her life in motion was propped up by the scaffoldings of education – which she was technically good at – and propelled by her parents, whom she felt previously unable to question. Grace's sense of not being in control of her own life is even manifest in her material circumstances: 'That!' she once cursed – pointing up to her apartment, as we sat on a bench in Lower Manhattan. Purchasing real estate in New York as an investment, and for their daughter to live in, has been a proud achievement for Grace's upwardly mobile Chinese parents who came 'from nothing', as she put it. Yet this 'generous' act invokes in Grace a sense of infantilization and unwanted indebtedness. Much like the career in finance which she had been set to embark on, Grace occupies her apartment with a bitter acknowledgment that she should feel grateful and get on with it, without wanting to actually be there.

Chinese 'Tiger' parenting strategies of micro-management and high expectations have been compared to stereotypical Jewish or upper middle-class Americans (Deresiewicz, 2014). For those like Chua (2011) who

proselytize this parenting style, it is a process of socialisation like any other, whereby children are to ultimately internalise as their own the high standards set out for them. In cases such as Grace and among the Chinese students in Bregnbaek's (2016) study, however, parental pressures have failed to ignite an internal spark for the child to run under their own accord. Rather, the attempt to 'pipeline' Grace into financial security has proven too heavy handed and fateful, causing a mental health breakdown. Grace reiterated how pervasive it was for peers in finance to experience their lives in over-determined and unpleasant ways:

> JL: I don't know whether you know anyone else that's gone into finance and is finding their job a bit 'shit'?
>
> Grace: Oh, everyone. Anyone that went into finance and actually likes it, everyone thinks 'you're crazy.' Well two of my best friends live in [New] Jersey. I used to crash on their couch when my parents are here, and I can't handle them anymore. One of them works in internal consulting – both of them graduated from M. U. Business school – one of them works in internal consulting for [a company]. They do consumer products like pots and coffee machines. She hates her life. And her roommate works in Goldman Sachs treasury department working from 7 [am] till like 10 [pm] every day. Every time I see her it just looks like she's gonna faint. She's just totally out of it.

In the case of Grace's friends, too they appear to occupy their positions of privilege fatalistically.

It is salient that Grace and her friends are from China where Confucian traditions of filial piety still function to stifle the extent to which young people feel able to challenge their parents (Bregnbaek, 2016). Two of the Americans in our study, Stella and Ricardo (both white) experienced similar pressures as Grace to take up prestigious openings, though they had more of a capacity to reject these unwanted templates of the future.

## Stella's story

Our final narrative comes from Stella in Los Angeles who is trying to become an actor. This career decision is condemned by her affluent wider family, other than her supportive mother. Like Grace, Stella spent time as a teenager at a boarding school abroad – in this case the U.K., where she was bullied. In Los Angeles, she is involved in Alcoholics Anonymous which she speaks highly of as a source of community and belonging – following a socially uncertain and geographically mobile youth until college, and then tempestuous time once there. The sense of professional foreboding invoked by internships that were laid out for her as an undergraduate had an adverse reaction:

> Well, I've interned at the Senate, I've interned at [a television show], I've interned at the Mayor's office, which was like a nine to five internship. I remember being at City Hall in New York and going to the bathroom and going to wash my hands and seeing myself in my suit. And, you know, City Hall in New York is beautiful, beautiful office building, in my fucking outfit – and I was *so* miserable. And I remember looking at the suit and thinking this is just a fucking costume. And I mean, I quit that internship and spiralled out of control for a while which culminated in me going to rehab. But just to be candid, and this is anonymous, there were suicidal tendencies. I mean I hate this cos it's dramatic, but it's the fucking truth. It was a matter of life or death. [breaking up] It really was. So, yeah, [my extended family] can go fuck themselves, because if they don't get that, they just don't get that. And I can't make them. I can't make them live that experience of what it was like for me to be in my apartment in New York with this prestigious internship and wanting to fucking kill myself.

As with Grace, the parental deployment of capital had a detrimental effect on Stella's well-being. The number of internships enumerated indicate an increasingly common, class-anxious strategy of what Bathmaker et al. (2016) term the 'hypermobilization' of capital. When framed in relation to Stella's well-being, there is an ironic, perverse element of inequality when those receiving an unfair advantage experience such conditions as unbearable. From the perspective of parenting, the stories and Grace and Stella are examples of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011): securing one's child a great education and work opportunities resulting in them feeling suicidal and spiteful towards you. One might note that Stella's story is less 'fated' than Grace, who feels more helpless, in that Stella has attained the financial backing and manoeuvrability to abandon 'government internships' in favour of Hollywood. Nonetheless, an ominous sense of having to prove herself and her alternative path hangs over Stella's immediate and imagined future.

This research has focused on the first months and years coming out of an undergraduate degree, which may be a chaotic and uncertain time. Grace and Stella are examples of graduates who, despite other problems, can mobilise financial support from parents and both spoke of post-graduate study as a potential escape from their predicaments. For such graduates – mental health abiding – behind the scenes support may well come into play and prop them up down the line. A more buoyant manifestation of the language of fate is granted by such forms of financial support which enable a resilience to withstand crises and carry on to new opportunities on the back of adversity (Allen, 2016; Brooks & Everett, 2008; Friedman & Laurison, 2019). However wretched Stella's situation of temporarily dropping out of university, the money made available for rehabilitation and re-entry to college to achieve graduation before now living across the country with her own car un-burdened by debt (and without others to look after) represent a 'turnaround' that is worlds apart

from the many people in New York City who have a problem with alcohol or drugs. Furthermore, without taking away from how unpleasant and even untenable Stella's situation was for her, her internships will still stand on her CV. When Markovitz (2015, p. 12) refers to elite HE and its auxiliary culture as 'a gilded cage that ensnares the rich and excludes the rest' it is this unanimously bleak scenario that he is referring to.

## Conclusion

The narratives in this article present versions of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) in which parents and their children have attempted to use HE to achieve their goals, and yet in various ways they have been punished or paralysed in the process. In the four graduates described here we see varying intersections of advantage and adversity and both support and conflict within the family. A glaring factor affecting the extent of expectation and thus fixity to certain paths is differences in the funds available and the amount of debt accrued. Further to wealth inequalities, privilege may lie in the capacity to make one's own decisions with the acceptance and even support of parents. It is noteworthy that economically advantaged graduates such as Grace may not have this luxury, and even those with considerable financial and moral support such as Evelyn may find that this, too carries burdens and a sense of reciprocity. Graduates were shown to occupy contrasting identities such as Denise, being from the 'upper middle-class' and in $115,000 of debt, and such as Stella, whose 'well-funded' journey from being bullied at a boarding school to her current precarious path of trying to become an actor has involved suicidal tendencies, drug rehabilitation, and Alcoholics Anonymous. While the graduates in this study are privileged in various ways, they experience other aspects of adversity which are qualitatively different to social inequality. In light of these other impediments to graduate prosperity, perhaps there should be an expansion to the meanings and metrics through which graduate prospects are evaluated. This point is relevant to concerns about equity and well-being across demographics. Even while pursuing values of fairness and equality in education and beyond, caution should be taken not to over-romanticise their achievement as a panacea to societal problems. As shown here, there are other obstacles to look out for even after opportunities have been attained.

We have introduced the language of fate as a means of conceptualising some of the potentially deterministic repercussions of aspiration and HE attendance. High costs and high expectations are the prime forces identified affixing people's perceived pathways and preventing a sense of manoeuvrability. These factors are specific to this context of a costly private university in the United States, although equivalent dynamics may exist across transitions out of Higher Education. McDermott and Varenne (1995) describe how labels

ascribed to children in school regarding their alleged (dis)ability or (lack of) intelligence chisel differentiated futures that may be out of synchronisation with present or later potential, and the same fateful dynamic may occur regarding HE choices. What may have been an aspiration at one point in time may become solidified and in turn govern a graduate's future. Ironically, this dynamic makes the future appear more constrained, when the ideals of HE include opening the future up. In this way, it has been worthy to identify that it is not only 'social problems' which negatively impact aspirations, but aspirations themselves which may generate social problems. As in Irving's (2017) emphasis on radical contingency, acts and decisions may have lifelong consequences. New York and Los Angeles are interesting places to explore these issues as the symbolic cradles of aspiration in the United States.

## Notes

1. The names given to the university and to all participants are pseudonyms.
2. SNL is an acronym for Saturday Night Live, a popular talk-show with celebrities hosted each Saturday evening in New York and broadcast around the word.

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