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Higher Education, Social Mobility and Social Class: Importance of Habitus and Capitals when Analysing Student Choice and Transitions

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Extensive literature spanning decades articulates the complexities for young people from 'lower socioeconomic communities' in the decision-making process surrounding education – possibly highlighting how Widening Participation (WP) policy and practice, is not necessarily reducing socioeconomic inequalities, and contributing to social mobility. Arguing for the crucial role of cultural, social, and economic capital to be considered in educational policy-making, this article examines the educational and transitional experiences of students from lower socioeconomic communities within the United Kingdom (UK), moving to Higher Education (HE). Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit (habitus, agency, and capitals) is operationalised in reference to the data, to unravel the fraught relationship of habitus and choice or more specifically 'free choice'. Through the use of focus groups, the research suggests that despite governmental optimism and policy the presence of anxiety and fear in young people from lower socioeconomic communities, in applying to HE, is multifaceted. This article highlights that despite students demonstrating a determination and aspiration in the transition from Further Education (FE) to HE, the idea of 'choice' remains widely problematic for the under-represented. The article urges educators and policy-makers to rethink the complexities of choice concerning student transitions when opportunities in terms of life trajectories remain governed by social class boundaries.

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Following the introduction of Widening Participating (WP) policies internationally (United States of America, United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia) the concept of student ‘choice’, ‘informed choice’ or ‘free choice’, and Bourdieu’s notion of habitus when analysing student transitions to HE remains a highly topical and sensitive topic within the disciplines of sociology and education. The process of choice contains a lot more than the matching of qualifications and achievements to opportunities (Ball et al., 2002). Decision-making is a complex process that accounts for a multitude of factors.

With the increase in the number of students participating in further education qualifications the development and growth of HE is recognised internationally, contributing to the increase in numbers of young people transitioning to an array of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). As such, it is important that as well as investigating overall ‘class’ difference in student participation researchers attempt to understand the social diversities and hierarchies at play in various fields (traditional learners, non-traditional learners, BTEC learners, A-level learners, Access to HE learners). In the UK alone, it is reported around fifty percent of young people progress to HE (GOV. UK, 2022), compared to just five percent in the 1960s (Bolton, 2012), rising to 14% by the end of the 1970s (Lightfoot, 2016). Following on from the two major higher educational movements of the 1960s, and 1990s, the last decade has seen social mobility gaining momentum internationally, including the UK Government (Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills, 2016) arguing for HEIs to consider the urgency and priority of social mobility, in relation to reducing socioeconomic inequalities (Sutton Trust, 2018). In an attempt to improve social mobility, the WP agenda in the UK, which has been in place for decades, continues to guide educational institutions when assisting young people in the transition to HE (Crawford 2012; House of Commons 2018). The aim of such policy includes widening educational access to HE and HEIs for the under-represented, thus including lower socioeconomic communities (HEFCA 2015; Hubble et al. 2021). With such attention around participation, access, aspiration and attainment for students from lower socioeconomic communities it could be argued that viewing social mobility in such ways may overlook some of the challenges and complexities students face when transitioning from lower socioeconomic backgrounds into middle-class environments of universities and then the professional market (Reay, 2021).

Beverley Skeggs (2004) argued the notion of class is denied as a social and cultural issue within the political arena. However, the relationship between socioeconomic inequalities and education is widely recognised within sociological and educational research and theory. Over a decade ago statistics indicated young people from higher socioeconomic communities within the UK are five to six times more likely to enter university, compared to young people from lower socioeconomic groups (Reay et al., 2001). Although educational political agendas are well documented, including statistics to indicate an improvement in the participation of young people since the 1960s, inequalities continue to exist (Alon, 2009; Boliver, 2011; Crawford, 2012; Hubble et al., 2021), with young people from lower socioeconomic communities remaining significantly under-represented in HEIs in the UK (Crawford, 2012; Gorard et al., 2019; Hubble et al., 2021; Reay, 2004). Despite UK governmental aims for inclusivity and social mobility, it is argued that HE sectors within the UK and internationally remain highly stratified by social class (Bowers-Brown, 2006; Crawford, 2012; Hubble et al., 2021; Reay et al., 2001; Reay, 2006; Reay, 2021; Zipin et al., 2015). Although WP policy ‘looks good on paper’ (Bathmaker et al., 2016: 154), the following article argues that the massification (access to HE for everyone) of HE has been successful in producing multiple but not equal opportunities for young people. Therefore, through increasing competition within a stratified HE system socioeconomic inequalities continue to be perpetuated. Thus highlighting, how WP policy and practice have a long way to go for young people from socioeconomic communities to really make a difference in their lives and therefore contribute to social mobility.

As previously alluded to, for the past two decades socioeconomic inequalities with regard to the transition to HE continues. Following on from her previous research Diane Reay continues to argue, the experience and process of decision-making for young people in the transition to HE, remains governed by ‘dominant discourses and the broader social and political landscapes’ (2018: 528). Moving into the 21st century, sociological and educational research continues to highlight similar challenges (Bathmaker et al., 2016). In the pursuit of highlighting the importance of research around the idea of social mobility, and although the following article focuses on socioeconomic inequalities and education, it is important to acknowledge other

areas of under-representation and disadvantaged communities within the broader context of transition to HEIs. Working with Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit to analyse the data provides nuanced narratives of how HE and social mobility, in relation to socioeconomic status, is fraught with tension and warrants continued investigation from the field of sociology and education.

RECENT THEORISING IN SOCIAL CLASS

The authors explore the persistent under-representation of a particular group of young people in HE – which can be understood as not only class, but also ethnicity and gender. It is important to recognise how the concept of *social class* is relational in which 'working-class experiences do not make sense unless they are contextualised within the wider class hierarchy' (Reay, 2021: 55). The term *class* continues to be utilised when investigating and reporting on the wider social and political contexts surrounding social mobility and immobility, the relation to socioeconomic inequalities of society, and the relevance of class division (Clayton et al., 2009). For young people from lower socioeconomic communities, such divisions continue to create and contribute to induced feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. The authors work with Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit of habitus, agency and capitals (social, cultural, and economic) to explore the complex decision-making processes and transitions of students from lower socioeconomic communities, in relation to social mobility.

The lack of options in relation to choice and the transition to HE, remains saturated with perceptions of instability and insecurity (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Reay, 2018). Due to the wider social and political contexts, it could be argued that young people from lower socioeconomic communities do not possess an element of 'choice' let alone 'free choice' and are immediately disadvantaged in the decision-making process. Bourdieu (1986a) refers to this inability to seek out opportunities as dominant and legitimate forms of capital (economic, social and cultural). Thus, rendering 'free choice' in relation to the transition to HE a mirage, with young people from lower socioeconomic communities' experiencing socioeconomic inequalities within the decision-making process and transitional choices. As highlighted so far, the notion of lower socioeconomic students being able to choose freely in the same way higher socioeconomic students do, can be dismissed in the recognition of the relationship between power and constraint (Ball et al., 2002). This is not to say that lower socioeconomic students do not navigate educational spaces but it is important to recognise their position as being unstable and self-doubting – compared to that of the higher socioeconomic students (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). With reference to the educational institutions in which young people are encouraged to interact with, Bourdieu highlights the complexities around the social and cultural mismatch between the internalised dispositions of the 'working class' – their 'habitus', and the social spaces – 'fields', (Bourdieu, 1986a), often emotionally referred to as *feeling like a fish out of water*. Whereas, when habitus encounters a field it is familiar with, habitus operates like *a fish in water*.

HABITUS

Although habitus is just one element of Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit and most contested concept (Reay, 2004), it lies at the heart of his theoretical framework and is fundamental when unearthing the hidden and deeply rooted structures of society. It is worth noting how the concept of habitus is complex and takes on many different forms in Bourdieu's writing. As such, and when utilised as a research method, it is important to acknowledge how the concept of habitus is an unstable concept that continues to evolve within academic literature. Specifically, in the research of the 'under-represented', or 'over-represented' within society. For Bourdieu habitus is an entanglement of the past and present, a collective entity dominated by and through social and cultural conditions which continue to reproduce a 'system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception and action' (1977: 86). These 'internalised structures' and 'schemes of perception' go on to steer one's apperception of the world in which they belong or exist and as such urges educators and policy-makers to appreciate the journey travelled by individual students in the transition to HE. According to Bourdieu, habitus, a sense of habitus, and what is valued within the habitus is shaped through a variety of 'institutions' – family, community, friendships, education and employment. Thinking with Bourdieu, it is these institutions that are the driving force behind how we relate to the world and in turn situates students as gendered, raced, citizens and classed. If we as educators, policy-makers,

and researchers continue to engage in the wider contexts surrounding student choice and transition, we may begin to truly appreciate what matters for students when considering the transition to HE. This would involve an empathetic understanding of student needs, all student needs, and viewing students as essential contributors regardless of the student profile (age, gender, race, background).

Bourdieu's habitus allows for a theoretical space to analyse a particular student group, and how access to HE is restricted and/or limited for students from lower socioeconomic communities, thus conflicting with the very notion of choice when transitioning to HE. In relation to this particular article, the authors operationalise habitus in a way to consider, not only how the students in the study exist in the social world, but how the social world exists in the students. Although gender is not the focus of this article, it is crucial to acknowledge the role assigned gender plays when exploring and analysing dominant and dominated groups in society (Reay, 2004). In relation to student choice and transition to HE, and for this particular cohort of students, working 'with' habitus as a conceptual method, somewhat allows for a broader scope to emerge from the initial research study, to accommodate for the wider relational contexts.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus demonstrates how bodies do not only exist in the social world, but how the social world exists in bodies (Bourdieu, 1981 cited in Reay, 2004). For Bourdieu habitus is:

a socialised body. A structured body, is a body which has been incorporated the immanent structures of a world or a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world (1998: 81).

Habitus embodies economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals, presented as individual dispositions. This can be reflected in the way an individual interacts, walks, gestures, and responds to particular life events (Bourdieu, 1990a). He claims that such dispositions are acquired understandings drawn from beyond the individual, which drive a person's actions and behaviours. Bourdieu (2000) argues individuals will always find themselves in situations, in which they will not have the answers, feel uncomfortable, and be challenged. As a way to manage or source a solution, individuals are unconsciously programmed to call upon such predisposed acquired strategies.

For Bourdieu, habitus is embodied rather than it being composed solely of perceptions and attitudes (Reay, 2004). While Bourdieu's notion of habitus enables individual agency, it simultaneously predisposes people towards behaving and acting in certain ways. 'The habitus, as a system of dispositions to a certain practice, is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour, and thus for regularity of modes of practice, and if practices can be predicted (Bourdieu, 1990b: 77)' – whilst placing or grouping individuals through specific life experiences, opportunities, and challenges. For example, the school one attended, the family structure, the geographic location of both family home and school, extra-curricular activities, places travelled, and peer groups etc. shape and frames the access to future opportunities, thus conflicting with the notion of choice, informed choice, and free choice. Therefore, the concept of Habitus is a useful way to operationalise the shared stories from students, as it enables the understanding of the relationships between individuals and their social, economic and cultural contexts (Callaghan, 2005; Reay, 2006).

STUDY CONTEXT

Prior to commencing the research, the authors had experienced a diverse student population including some of the complexities around FE students in the process of applying to HEI's through university open-days and the UCAS system. This included some assumptions regarding non-traditional (students whom do not take the traditional route of attending postsecondary education but are seeking further education) learners and their capabilities in transitioning into HE to undertake health and social care degrees. To be more specific, nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, radiography, occupational therapy, paramedics and social care. At the time of the research access to the students within the study was through the direct relationship of acting as programme lead for a level three health and social care programme during the academic year 2013, based in a FE college and situated geographically in a disadvantaged area of England in the UK.

The broad aims of the research include:

- to operationalise Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit (habitus, agency, and capitals) in reference to the data;
- to unravel the fraught relationship of habitus and choice as a way to analyse the complex decision-making processes and transitions of students identified as belonging to what could be classified as 'lower socioeconomic communities', 'under-represented' or the dominated, in relation to social mobility;
- how HE and social mobility, in relation to socioeconomic status, is fraught with tension;
- through the use of focus groups investigate the complexities in applying to HE for young people from lower socioeconomic communities.

Despite both male and female students commonly accommodating student places in the said level three programme, the research carried out in the academic year 2013–2014 was an unprecedented year as no male students applied for the academic year 2013. Therefore, although the focus of the study was to investigate the complexities for young people from 'lower socioeconomic communities' in the decision-making process, we cannot ignore the fact, the study compromised of an all-female cohort. The all-female cohort was aged between 17–19-year-old females, students completing the first year of a two-year, level three non-traditional (non-traditional education provides an alternative for students) health and social care programme.

Student details compromising of previous educational attainment, geographic area, age, and gender were attained on admission, and established the nature of the cohort and study. All 20 students were invited to participate, with all 20 subsequently participating voluntarily. The research data was gathered in April 2014, during the pre-entry period of applying to HEIs, which consisted of identifying a programme of study, university, and writing a personal statement in preparation for applying through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) for September 2014. In order to gather and investigate the experiences of transition with the 20 students, the research utilised focus groups as a research method, to explore the possibility of capturing the shared lived experiences of the students, through the use of shared senses, backgrounds, meanings and challenges. The use of focus groups as a research method provided an opportunity for students to share lived experiences and deep-rooted perceptions and expectations of education in relation to the transition to HE. This is the very context, in which Bourdieu proposed the shaping and forming of habitus take place. In terms of generating and contributing to existing knowledge, the article reflects upon the narratives collated from the study in a way of understanding such experiences of young people from lower socioeconomic communities within the UK, in the transition to HE.

PARTICIPANTS

All 20 students enrolled onto the health and social care programme were invited to participate in the study. Participation letters were sent out via email to the students along with the informed consent forms. All 20 students shared the same attainments for successful enrolment (minimum of 5 GCSEs of C and above [at the time of carrying out the research]), came from the same educational setting, department and programme, thus bringing people together who shared commonalities and similar social and educational experiences. Bourdieu (1977) discusses this concept of similarity, as the conditionings of one's capital possession, which then produces similar habitus. Atkinson (2010: 3) describes this as, 'a complex of durable dispositions, propensities, and schemes of perception and appreciation that then guide practice'. It is important to highlight not all students, completing non-traditional level two and three programmes, will transition to HE and may go on to successfully attain an apprenticeship or gain employment. However, for this small cohort of students within the study, this was not the case. This particular level three programme provided young people, the opportunity, to experience an array of health and social care professions and practices. The exposure over two years aimed to support students in acquiring experience, and developing specific interests, within a particular health and/or social care field, to support the application to HE within such professions (nursing, midwifery, social care, occupational therapy, physiotherapy etc.).

The article will go on to present in more depth the purposefulness of the focus groups, within this particular piece of research, in enabling a 'safe' space for students to share commonalities, expectations, experiences, and aspirations.

RESEARCH PROCESS AND DATA

The authors argue that using focus groups as a research method to explore and share lived experiences is crucial for this particular study. However, like any research method, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of focus groups. For example, acknowledging how for some students they may have not felt safe enough to voice their opinions resulting in dominant groups continuing to have their voices heard whilst marginal voices continuing to get lost amongst the discussions. Acknowledging the limitations of focus groups enabled the authors to be attuned to the voices within the data.

In the context of social mobility, the focus groups developed into a space in which students shared stories, and discussed educational encounters. Such spaces encouraged what Bourdieu (1996) discusses, as *allowing the agent(s) to construct reality collectively*. The social interactions observed and gathered throughout the focus groups, for the purpose of research data, were lively, creating rich and meaningful student narratives. The students provided each other with the rationale behind their choices, options, and decisions, and share openly their vulnerabilities in relation to the transition to HE. As Morgan (1996: 139) explains, 'what makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews is the fact that the students both query each other and explain themselves to each other'. The students participated positively with each other throughout the focus group by offering support and guidance, through the sharing of individual challenges and lived experiences.

Bourdieu's practice theory analysis is based on the notion of social action. For example, how social action is carried out, and through, by exploring perceptions, common understandings and assumptions, and is different to cultural 'mentalism'. Bourdieu (2000) argues that alternative approaches to research and analysis, such as phenomenology, continue to be underpinned by 'mentalism', and in doing so renders such analysis *incapacitated*. Bourdieu (1977) argues how the context of field and capital, in understanding the phenomenological endeavour itself, are pivotal aspects when performing research analysis.

Ethical approval was obtained with the associated HEI at the time of completing the study. Research confidentiality took place throughout and informed consent was received from all 20 students. All 20 students were aware that they could opt out of the research at any time.

DATA ANALYSIS

FAMILY, FINANCES, ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Amongst an array of challenges shared within the focus groups, references to the transition to HE, and the wider impact this may have on families were typically discussed. Indicating the nature of the decision-making process, being that of emotionally and socially complex for prospective undergraduates from lower socioeconomic communities.

Student 1

I want to be a paramedic, but I can't travel the distance to the university every day, and I can't move away because my mum needs me to look after my little sister

Student 5

I do really want to go to university, and I know I can get a student loan, but I still can't go, because I need to work and help my mum and dad out

As previously discussed, the focus groups provided a space in which the students shared lived experiences, and understandings grounded from a place of familiarity and commonality. Something Bourdieu refers to as a collective capital grouping. The majority of students shared personal stories around family needs and responsibilities when considering applying to particular HEIs. Such caring accountability, loyalty, and commitment to family are something that could be felt throughout the focus group sessions.

Alongside the family pressures one of the key elements of transition and ‘choice’ of university raised by the focus group was the financial constraints associated with attending HE. Research carried out to explore and investigate ways in which finances impact on student choice demonstrates students from lower socioeconomic communities consider the financial impact (Crawford, 2012; Hubble et al., 2021) and pressures on the family, more than anything else, in the transition to HE (Somerville, 2013). In May 2019, a literature review was carried out in the UK (Pollard et al., 2019) to investigate the financial constraints students from lower socioeconomic communities’ face. Some of the key findings include: the concerns around whether the benefits of HE outweighs the cost are more common among students with low attainment and/or the first family member to consider HE; the limited research on the decision-making process of those students not planning to go to HE, or considering not applying, may suggest that financial constraints are a key factor in this process; for undergraduate students concerns around daily living costs and day-to-day management of their finances can affect retention – resulting in students not completing their chosen degree. It is also worth noting how the financial concerns of students have become more significant as a result of the global pandemic (Covid-19) (National Union of Students, 2021). A survey commissioned by the National Union of Students in May 2021 reported extremely high numbers of students struggling financial as a result of the pandemic and their ability to cope.

For some students, such constraints began at the very beginning of the process in applying through the UCAS system for a university place:

Student 5

It’s going to cost me money to apply [UCAS], so I don’t even know if I will have this money when it comes to applying. So, if I don’t get in I would have wasted my money.

Further constraints included an array of possible life trajectories, including choosing an undergraduate degree programme, location of the HEI in relation to ‘home’, and supporting oneself throughout the three/four years of study. Economic capital continued to run a major theme when considering life trajectories, with the topic of financial pressures at the forefront of the focus group discussion. In relation to informed decision-making, it is abundantly clear the concept of choice is layered with complexities within educational and future employment transitions:

Student 3

The university is literally on my doorstep. So, I can live at home and not worry about not paying my rent.

Student 1

I have no option but to choose nursing because the NHS pay the fees and pays a bursary.

Student 9

It is the same for me really but I just don’t want to do anything health-related, I want to do English Literature. Working in healthcare is not for me. The only thing is, it’s going cost me at least nine grand a year to do something that I really want to do, not something I have to do.

Through the focus group discussions, the students discovered a similarity in financial pressures and common issues of anxiety around the concept of deciding upon an undergraduate degree programme. This could be explained simply by acknowledging the economic and social situations in which these particular students find themselves. However, working with Bourdieu’s conceptual toolkit one could argue the concept of student *choice* is dictated and governed by one’s habitus, due to the importance of the economic, cultural and social capital, in relation to informed decision-making for life trajectories.

The relationship between structure and agency is captured in Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field, suggesting that the individual level interacts with the collective level through a common relationship to a field (Bourdieu, 1996). This idea was worked within the focus group sessions, as the students expressed similar complex issues, in the application to university,

including the sense of applying for a course they ‘should do’ versus ‘what they want to do’. The structures within the field that enable and constrain arise, both through the process of reproduction that is internally created in the relationship between habitus and field and through externally derived development and change (Callaghan, 2005).

Considering the narrative within the focus groups, the link between money and aspiration evolved into a complex subject and one that the students were grappling with when making decisions regarding applying to university. Somerville (2013) argues how the notion of aspiration, for example, to participate in HE starts early in a young person’s life and is entangled with awareness and attainment goals taking place within various educational spaces.

Student 20

I wanted to be a surgeon, or a doctor or something, not ‘just’ a nurse. My mum could not have paid for any of that though. It is expensive to go to uni to be a doctor, and I would have moved away, but because my mum is on her own I really need to get a job and help her out.

In this context, Somerville (2013) argues, having access to money is an issue with prospective HE students. Students expressed how their concerns were having a basic level of income, in order for their family to survive, as the desire was not so much what they would be earning following the completion of their degree, but whether or not they could study and contribute at the same time.

Student 15

I know I am not going to have any money, but what is new? It is not as if I have had money and going to uni will make it worse. The most important thing to me is getting away and experiencing uni life, and yeah this means having no money. I have always wanted to go uni but for me it is more about moving away, meeting new people not just getting a degree or a good job. The course I want to do allows students to travel to America for a placement. I have only ever been abroad once when I was a baby. This course will take me abroad and open my eyes to what I have not seen before.

The data demonstrates varied responses in relation to a number of financial constraints and the impact this may have on student choice (i.e. choosing or not choosing a course because of financial constraints). The student narrative above indicates a fatalistic attitude towards having no money and the sense that if one is going to go to university, they must put up with the associated costs. Despite decades of WP policies socioeconomic inequality in HE participation and degree acquisition became more of a concern following the introduction of tuition fees in England in 1998. Although university fees were means tested there were fears that the prospect of fees would create further barriers to HE participation for lower socioeconomic communities. Furthermore, concerns heightened following the increase in the cap on university tuition fees that took place in 2006 – 2007 and again in 2012 – 2013 (Crawford, 2012). Although it is widely documented how lower socioeconomic communities could be financially better off under the new reforms and HE participation rates should not have been affected by these changes, it is important to acknowledge how these reforms impact on student choice. Bourdieu’s (1996) theory around such pre-existing categories and structures directs our thinking around how students are being dictated to when considering the notion of ‘choice’. It was crucial to acknowledge such complexities when analysing student narratives, and how the notion of class becomes visible and invisible, which is embedded, placed, weaved, and knotted in the past, present, and future trajectories (Reay, 2006).

Moogan (2011) argues, young people, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are completely unaware of what university life can offer, which is not a surprise, as we have a high percentage of first-generation students. Reay (1998) argued that the concept of choice is a complex process, stating that possessing familial habitus which includes growing up in an environment where other family members know and participated in higher education, is the main element of choice and accounts for the difference in the decision-making process. Sianou-Kyrgiou (2008) agrees, stating how choice is not necessarily a straightforward process for some individuals, with factors including class differentials, and the value attached to studying, which most students will negotiate when applying to university (Archer et al., 2005).

Contributing to previous studies, the research findings continue to add value to such debates within the 21st Century. As academics situated within HE we have a responsibility to support social mobility, and this can be achieved through gaining insights into the lived experiences of student transitions and voicing such findings. By exploring the extent to which students within the study felt, in terms of their social and economic backgrounds, and consequently whether or not this had an impact on 'choice' and transition, educators and policymakers may consider the true nature of student 'choice'. Within the focus groups, experiences of being the first person in the family 'wanting' to go to university were shared. The following conversation about wanting to go to university was not unique within the focus groups sessions:

Student 2

My dad just doesn't get it. He says all the time I didn't go to university and I did okay.

Student 12

I did not even know about university. Not one person in my family even went to college never mind university. I am only on this course out of luck. My nana was poorly and a student nurse told me how she got into uni. So, I thought, right well I am going to do that. Sometimes it is not even about not listening to the family because they have never been to uni, sometimes families do not even know what to do or say.

One of the topics discussed during the focus group sessions explored the notion of academic ability, and whether or not the students wanted to continue further studies within an HEI, or enter employment. Students also discussed the low expectations of previous educational providers and the impact this has on their transitions:

Student 18

My school did not even bother if we passed our GCSEs or not. That is why I never got my science GCSE. If I did not understand something in science and I asked for help, I just got told to listen more carefully, and pay more attention. I just stopped asking and lost interest even though I knew I needed GCSE science to be a midwife. So now, I am just going to do something else.

Student 2

We had five different teachers for Maths in my final year at high school, so I just gave up in the end. I do not even think some of them were real teachers. I just thought the school is not bothered about us....so I just stopped going to class, and nobody said anything to my dad or me.

Students 18 and 2 expressed enthusiasm for their academic studies and a motivation to continue with their studies. However, both students' felt demoralised and had feelings of giving up. The student accounts of teacher expectations during non-compulsory education resonate with previous research into the educational experiences of young people from lower socioeconomic communities (Reay, 2006). However, despite the comment that the student 'lost interest', she did not disengage from education. The student continued to discuss during the focus group that she always wanted to go to university. Although she did not enjoy school, she was enjoying college and looking forward to progressing to HE. Her desire to continue within education demonstrated her tenacity and determination:

Student 2

I want to go to uni and get a good job. I do not want to just work in a dead-end job, like everybody else in my family. I want a nice house and car, and to be independent too. If I do get into uni and get a decent job, I will hopefully be able to support my mum and sister. We can then go on holiday and do nice stuff together as a family. But I just know that I can't move away and will need to go to a uni close by.

Students presented an image of deprivation and the positive impact going to university may bring, not just on them, but their families. The students discussed in depth the need to better themselves and their families, and how the transition to university will contribute towards this, by providing the skills and opportunities to gain successful employment. Additional comments

stated the need to stay close to their families, the support needed with the application, and the need for extra income.

Forsyth and Fulong (2000), discuss how lower socioeconomic groups choose to study at their local HEI, whereas the priority for the higher socioeconomic student is the academic status of the university. For example, students from lower socioeconomic communities are considerably more likely to access less prestigious and local post-1992 universities, catering for the needs of people from similar backgrounds (Ball et al., 1999; Reay et al., 2001), offering relatively low entry requirements, and thus reducing the financial burden of moving away. Furthermore, increased benefits are attached to those individuals who have attended the elite institutions, and it is argued that the socioeconomic inequalities which exist within society are perpetuated by the hierarchy of HEIs, with the higher socioeconomic groups retaining their privileges, and the elite continuing to reproduce itself (Leathwood, 2004).

DISCUSSION

As highlighted throughout the article Bourdieu's habitus allowed the authors to explore, investigate and analyse how access to HE is restricted and/or limited for students from lower socioeconomic communities, thus conflicting with the very notion of choice when transitioning to HE. Knowledge of the capitals, academic, social, economic and cultural, that students could access (Bourdieu, 1986a) enabled the authors to make sense of, not only student choice and the resources available to them, but allowed for a greater insight into the emotional responses and experiences of students throughout the decision-making process. Throughout the data analysis section, the authors acknowledged the extent to which students felt they had a 'choice' in their decision to progress to HE and the complex nature of the decision-making process presented for some students. As previously highlighted, for Bourdieu (1990c) the dispositions of the habitus are strongly influenced by the nature and extent of capitals at an individual's disposal. For Bourdieu it is the interplay of capital, field and habitus that generates the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990c).

Social mobility 'has uniformly positive connotations' (Reay, 2021). It is argued that HE improves social mobility and access to HE is essential for ensuring social equality (Hubble et al., 2021). With this in mind it is important to acknowledge the impact on the educational reforms around financial support, tuition fees, removal of bursaries and grants, employment and the challenges this presents, i.e. debt and the impact of these on student choices and decisions around HE. Furthermore, working and thinking with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capitals and field the data reveals the multifaceted complexities between lower socioeconomic habitus, HEI's and education reform and policy, focusing on the social, emotional and financial consequences for students. The data reveals that the imagery that surrounds social mobility, one of advancement, progress, aspirations, is much more complex for students than simplistic representations of educational attainment, success, achievement and social mobility (Lawler and Payne, 2018). Reay (2021: 54) argues that, 'social mobility is a process that is constantly troubled by questions of differential values and valuing at all stages of mobility', this includes the stages or periods when students from lower socioeconomic communities' access HEIs.

At a collective level, focus groups allow an understanding surrounding the relationship between structure and agency as a collective agency is embedded in the day-to-day shared lived experiences (Callaghan, 2005). Thompson's (1980: 10) explanation of the understanding of class as experience and process provides a useful insight.

If we stop history at a given point, there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live with their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.

The practice of aspiration can be understood as an intertwining interconnected life journey that consists of pathways, by which the middle classes negotiate their way between their needs and wants and are fortunate enough to make social connections in doing so (Appadurai, 2004). The authors of this article argue that the perceptions and choices students make in relation to HEIs play a role in 'reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in HE' (Ball et al., 2002). As Bourdieu (1986b: 169–170) explains:

The division into classes performed by sociology leads to the common root of the classifiable practices which agents produce and of the classificatory judgements they make of other agents' practices and their own [...] It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus....

In this vein, Bourdieu (1990a; 2000) discussed how the prospect of social access to the services and connections embedded in these conditions, which are transformed into the dispositions, schemes of one's perceptions, and subjective aspirations of the habitus. Appadurai agrees with Bourdieu's (2004: 69) perspectives on aspiration and discusses how it is conceived and developed throughout an individual's social life through the complexities of practice, which is developed through repetition, exploration, and assumption. Following the focus group session, the students continued to discuss the topics raised outside of the classroom. These important conversations were carried forward into student space in which Appadurai would describe as pathways of aspiration.

CONCLUSION

In the attempt to explore transitions, and the wider contexts surrounding the concept of choice, the authors of the article operationalised Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit to contribute towards a body of research around the complexities young people face in their education and career trajectories. One could argue, it may be appropriate to adopt an approach which is seemingly unconscious to the practices of everyday life, in order to move away from the economic concept of class differentials and explore how class may evolve through cultural practices. For example, Somerville (2013) identified how creative arts-based approaches in researching complex issues, such as aspiration, have the potential to be a productive method of investigation and exploration. She discusses how students would elicit more imaginative and deeper connections with a sense of self, and the use of focus groups as a method would be an addition to the art-based approach.

During the focus groups the concept of habitus was palpable. Students shared experiences openly around the perceptions of HE, and the challenges when thinking about the transition to HE. The focus groups allowed individuals the space to discuss what they know, and why they know and become reflexive about the world in which they live. The recordings of the discussions took place in an attempt to unravel the unknown and familiar by comparing the different perceptions, expectations, experiences and assumptions, in order to gain access, to not only the way in which the students expressed these experiences but what elements are subconscious and lying dormant. The focus groups revealed complexities of issues within the student's lives, including family pressures, financial strain and aspiration. The majority of the students discussed shared experiences but not necessarily at the same point in their life. Bourdieu (1990a: 60) argued,

the principle of the differences between individual habitus lies in the singularity of their social trajectories, to which there correspond series of chronologically ordered determinations that are irreducible to one another.

In the study, the students expressed how they are experiencing financial pressures, including poverty and concern about debt, but despite these issues, all claimed they would be applying through UCAS during the first term of commencing their second year at college. Even though Bourdieu (1990a: 60) discusses chronologically ordered determinations he also states, 'it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for members of that class'. Therefore, implying that while habitus is affected by certain social dynamics it also remains affected by an individual's commonalities of experience within the same social class. Therefore, Bourdieu's perspective implies individuals should be analysed as multiple agents with the ability to compartmentalise their experiences within their life course.

Ultimately, the study prompts and supports future international education and sociological research within the field with the 'non-traditional', 'marginalised', and 'under-represented' communities, to continue to grapple with the notion of 'choice' or 'free choice' in terms of life trajectories. The celebratory discourse that circulates WP continues to neglect the complexities and challenges non-traditional students face in accessing HEIs. As both educators and policy-

makers, possessing knowledge, awareness and understanding of the capitals young people from lower socioeconomic communities possess and have access to enables us to appreciate the concept of choice, and how the decision-making process is not a 'one-size' fits all. The study demonstrated that challenges continue to exist despite educational policy supposedly widening access, as opportunities remain governed by socially imposed 'class boundaries' – learned through the habitus and the capital one holds. Celebratory discourses around WP is failing to acknowledge that HE, internationally, is a highly stratified field in which HEIs possess widely disparate levels of status and resources (Reay, 2021). The romanticized and glamourized notion of 'choice' or 'free choice' upon which current educational policy exists is merely a mirage and has a significant consequence for students' future prospects across social class (Tsiplakides, 2018). Thus, highlighting how the notion of class continues to haunt educational sectors as it remains firmly positioned. A wide body of research and literature continues to develop around lower socioeconomic communities, working class and disadvantaged groups, suggesting how the modification of the notion of class has become moulded and nuanced in different ways to attend to education policy. Whatever terminology is used to refer and acknowledge the marginalised and othered, something that is consistent is the refusal of educational policy makers to accept that international research indicates that as higher education expands 'class-related inequalities are more likely to increase than decrease' (Reay, 2021: 54).

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data has not been made accessible for this publication. Participants were not asked to give consent for their data to be made widely available.

Participants gave permission for the authors to use the raw data for publication and conferences.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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