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Social deprivation and widening participation: the continuing power of local cultures

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Introduction
This paper seeks to explore social deprivation and widening participation in a South Yorkshire community that has been severely affected by the demise of its main industry. The paper considers why young adults living within a traditionally working class community in Barnsley choose not to enter higher education (HE). It discusses the expectations, motivations and aspirations of these young adults, what prevents them from entering HE, and the social, cultural and personal factors that contribute to their decision making. Participation has always been a much discussed issue for adult educators; this research contributes to our understanding of non-participation by focusing on the impact of specific local, cultural, social and economic factors.

Throughout the major part of 20th century, Barnsley had a strong economy based on coal and its supporting industries. However, the 1980s and early 1990s saw the almost complete disappearance of mining employment and, following the demise of the Yorkshire coal industry, Barnsley's economy has been lacklustre (Barnsley and Rotherham Chamber of Commerce, 2007). The socio-economic context in Barnsley (a town in the top 10% of the most deprived areas in the country) is well documented: 'It is in the unenviable position of being at the top of almost every negative indicator for health, wealth and the general economy.' (Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, 2006:12). Key influences on Barnsley's high level of deprivation are the number of people with low level or no qualifications and the fact that few young people stay in education (ibid, 2006). Analysis of The Higher Education Funding Council's (HEFCE) HE participation rates reinforces this. Young adult participation in HE was 29% nationally in 2000. In the parliamentary constituency in which the study takes place (Barnsley East and Mexborough), young adult participation rates fall to 14% (HEFCE, 2005). Recent trends in the participation rates of young adults from disadvantaged areas have, according to the HEFCE, increased from 30% in the mid-1990s to 36% by the end of the 2000s. In these areas there has been a 'substantial and sustained' (2010:2) increase in HE entrance since the mid 2000s. There has been a 30% increase over the last five years of young adults living in the most disadvantaged areas entering HE. Yet, despite this increase, young adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still the most under-represented group, and this background remains a strong determinant of HE participation (National Audit Office, 2008). Over the last 10 years, many studies have discussed the reasons why young adults from the most socially deprived areas choose not to enter HE. Despite the abundance of research around these issues, and the claims of increased participation in HE, the same issues appear to be preventing young adults from traditionally working class backgrounds from participating in HE.

This paper is based on the findings of a doctoral pilot study. Ten young adults undertaking level 3 qualifications at a Barnsley 6th form were interviewed in June 2009. The young adults discussed in this paper were all expecting grades that would allow them to participate in HE, yet they chose not to. During the interviews, they were asked to consider what they intended to do instead of attending university, what made them decide not to go to university, what would have needed to be put in place for them to participate in HE and what they thought being at university would be like.

Methodology

The findings are drawn from a set of semi-structured interviews designed to elicit information from the respondents regarding what prevents them from participating in HE, as well as considering their motivations and aspirations. The approach was essentially phenomenological. I wanted to understand how young adults who chose not to enter HE made sense of their choices; I wanted to see the world from their perspective. The method helped gather information that was personal and unique to the participants (Arkey & Knight, 1999), but it also helped shed light on the wider social, cultural and personal factors that contributed to the decision making processes of these young adults with respect to HE. An inductive approach was followed when analysing data. Attempts were made to find consistencies in the themes and patterns that emerged in order for some generalisations to be made pertaining to social deprivation, widening participation and the continuing power of local cultures.

Findings

The interviews uncovered a wide selection of information relating to different areas, with the following themes emerging from the data: debt aversion, lack of understanding around what being at university would be like, and confidence and locality issues.

Debt aversion
Without exception, all respondents had major concerns about the financial implications of attending university and the prospect of debt.

> 'First thing that comes to mind is a massive bill, I don't want that…I'd need to get a loan and I'd be paying it off for ever…'

The costs of participation and financial concerns have been considered by many researchers within the last 10 years (see Conner, 2001; Baxter et al, 2007 amongst others), yet little seems to have changed to alleviate widespread apprehension about the prospect of debt. Baxter et al make an interesting point when considering debt: '… the fear of debt could deter the very groups at whom widening participation initiatives are targeted.' (2007:279)

Whilst the costs were a major concern, respondents also made reference to whether attending university would actually be of benefit to them.

> 'I dunt want to be spending all that time and money when I might not even get a better job out of it.'

Interestingly, Watts (2006) considered how the financial costs of HE can actually outweigh any future financial returns. This was a definite source of anxiety for the respondents.

Lack of understanding around what being at university would be like
There was some vagueness and misinformation about university life. The majority of respondents showed only a limited understanding of what studying at university involved. This is interesting, given the extensive work that has taken place in recent years to promote higher education for all; this demographic did not appear to have increased its understanding over time. Conner made a similar point when considering non-participation in HE, as long ago as 2001. She made reference to the fact that the non-entrants from her study were ill-informed about many of the aspects associated with life and study in HE. What was unclear from my interviews was whether the respondents were ill-informed because they had chosen to be ill-informed. Comments from my respondents ranged from:

> 'I dunt know…don't you get lots of time off at uni?'

> 'I had a conditional or was it unconditional, I dunt know…anyway I'm not off…I wunt get in anyhow'

> 'I'd be in a massive lecture room, and I'd have to work independently without any help from my teacher.'

> 'You have to work on your own…I'm already no good with deadlines.'

> 'If I'm being honest I'm not sure what studying at uni would be like.'

Confidence and locality issues

> 'I think I'm just scared about going, I don't know why I'm just scared to go…meeting new people…I've just not got the confidence to go…maybe in 12 months time.'

An interesting issue that came to light was that the majority of respondents did not feel ready or confident enough to attend university, particularly a university that was not local. It appeared that this lack of confidence was related to discomfort with respect to moving out of a familiar area. When asked where they would attend if they had chosen to participate in HE, all respondents stated that they would attend a locally-based university. They viewed HE in their locality as at least an option for them. They had little or no interest in studying elsewhere, which has implications given the avowed intention across political parties of ensuring that able students from all social classes are able to attend elite universities. They appeared to perceive HE in their locality very differently from HE further afield. In fact, given the opportunity, the majority of respondents would have participated in HE had they been able to stay at their 6th form.

Discussion
Clearly, given the size of the pilot study sample and the limitations of the methodology employed, I am not suggesting that my findings are representative of the population as a whole. However, after accepting these caveats, the research nevertheless sheds further light on some interesting issues around non-participation

in HE, whilst focusing particularly on the impact of specific local, cultural, social and economic factors.

Several authors have made reference to the fact that young adults from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds are less like to apply for HE (see Metcalf, 1997 amongst others). Bibbings (2006), for example, points out it is well established that there are groups who continue to be under-represented within HE.

> …there is a plethora of research which demonstrates that socio-economic status, along with and linked to educational background, is a key factor associated with higher education participation rates.

> (Bibbings, 2006:76)

Whilst my research has uncovered nothing to indicate that this is changing significantly, several interesting issues do indeed warrant further discussion.

I was particularly interested in ascertaining whether the cultural values held by the respondents in relation to education may have militated against them entering HE (Mac an Ghail, 1996 cited in Hutchins and Archer, 2001). As already touched upon, during the majority of the 20th century, Barnsley had a thriving economy that was based on coal and supporting industries. This shaped the entire local infrastructure, landscape and the communities within Barnsley. It had a fairly high level of economic activity and it was an industry that required some specialist knowledge and skills. During this time, therefore:

> ...coalfield areas and communities felt a lesser need for educational qualifications and progression because jobs were often available (with training) that did not appear to require academic qualifications.

> (Barnsley and Rotherham Chamber of Commerce, 2007:6)

In more recent times, Barnsley East and Mexborough has been characterised by the following stark conditions: around 43% of the people aged 16 to 74 have no academic, vocational or professional qualifications, with less than 5% gaining a level 3 qualification, 15% are deemed to be not in good health, with 27% having limiting long-term illness and 41.7% are economically inactive (Defra, Rural Statistics Unit, 2004). There is little doubt that the demise of the coal industry has left a lasting legacy, both economically and educationally, within Barnsley. However, the cultural values of the respondents in relation to education did not appear to be constrained by the conditions and characteristics outlined; they appeared to view education as being of value. Nonetheless, whilst they appeared to value education, what was particularly striking was the importance that respondents placed on HE being available within their locality, and how studying at a local university was constructed. It was interesting to note that respondents did not want to leave their local community. There is evidence to suggest that individuals tend to identify strongly with their own community centre rather than even Barnsley as a whole (Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, 2006). Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why some respondents stated that they would only consider attending in their locality. Like Hutchins and Archer (2001:71), I use the term *construction* to:

> …emphasize that all knowledge is perspectival and that what is accepted as knowledge varies across groups [AND] …'common sense' knowledge that is shared by members of particular groups.

To my respondents, local universities are constructed as being accessible and those further afield, out of their reach. This construction was present within the discussions of the majority of respondents. They did not see HE as 'not being for the likes of them' (see Bibbings, 2006:76) but that those out of their locality were just not an option. This particular discourse appeared to be linked to their construction of HE out of their locality being high cost and that these costs may outweigh future benefits (see Hutchins and Archer, 2001; Watts and Bridge, 2006; amongst others). Callender's work (2003) discusses how students from working class backgrounds were more likely to be averse to being in debt and show a reluctance to accept the debt attached to being a student. This was again evident within my research with all respondents being acutely aware that participating in HE would incur long term debt. However, a striking feature of the findings was that respondents appeared to accept this fate. Debt alone was not a significant deterrent to participation. Debt in conjunction with studying outside of their locality, with no guarantee of a job as a result of participation, appeared to be constructed in a very different manner.

As touched upon, all respondents outlined that if they were to participate in HE in the future, they would apply locally. Interestingly, when probed further, the majority stated they would have participated in HE had they been able to continue at their present 6th form centre. The majority did not have the confidence to study further afield. This suggests that little has changed amongst certain social groups with respect to their sense of entitlement and social confidence during the past twenty years of supposed widening participation. In their recent study, Cozier et al (2010) discuss how many middle class students expressed a strong sense of entitlement about going to university; this was engendered by their schools and families. Yet for the working class students, both in their study and in my own research, this was not the case. Part of the preparation for university according to Cozier et al involves the 'inculcation of self confidence' (2010:67). Being given advice by parents and/or family members who had been to university themselves is all part of the preparation that respondents in my research could not access. Participating in HE at their present educational establishment or within their town would help remove the social costs attached to widening participation. If they were to participate, the need for the respondents to adapt to change, and to fit in, would be minimal. This is understandable, given that they appeared to have limited understanding of what being at university would be like. They were reticent about participating in an unchanged HE institutional culture and wider system that they did not appear to fully understand (Archer et al, 2003).

Whilst not considered directly, issues pertaining to the aspirations of respondents were implicit in each interview. The Sutton Trust (2001) argued that the education of a child tended to resemble that of their parent, insofar as young people brought up by parents with few or no qualifications and no family experience of HE tended to have low educational aspirations. Although the parents of the respondents had not continued in education beyond school leaving age they were, however, keen for their children to attend university if it enhanced their long term employment prospects. Perhaps this is why respondents were eager to complete their level three qualifications and why they were all expecting grades that would have enabled them

to participate in HE had they so desired. Significantly, Watts and Bridges (2006) discussed that non-participation was not simply a matter of low aspirations, but that it may arise from different aspirations, which are linked to the lives and lifestyle of young adults who may not see any benefit to HE. As Watts and Bridges intimate, the young adults in my study who chose not to access HE did not appear to have low aspirations. They had a variety of future aspirations, ranging from gaining employment to obtaining an apprenticeship and even staying on for an extra year at their 6th form. They had different aspirations.

Conclusion

Roberts (2004:90) points out that some cruel observers described Barnsley as 'a small town in Yorkshire a couple hundred miles north of London geographically, but several time zones away culturally'. There is little doubt that the demise of the Yorkshire coal industry and with it, Barnsley's once thriving economy, in conjunction with low levels of education and high levels of economic inactivity has shaped the "way of life" in Barnsley. Given the fact that the respondents interviewed in this pilot study have been subject to such social deprivation, it is perhaps not surprising that they chose not to participate in HE. The interviews indicated that their choice not to participate was based on the debt attached to participation, particularly if the financial costs outweighed future returns. Yet in spite of the conditions in, and characteristics of, their local community, all respondents appeared to value education. This is an encouraging sign given the current education levels in Barnsley and the lack of value placed on academic education in the not-too-distant past. All those interviewed had a degree of motivation and were keen to complete their present qualifications as they believed it would benefit them in whatever they decided to do. Perhaps the most interesting point of all was that they attached a greater cost to HE out of their locality both in terms of finance, but also in terms of the social costs attached to attending outside of their locality, which were linked to issues around their own self confidence. This is an area I intend to probe further as my research develops.

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