

Parents' Experiences of HE Choice

Abstract

This paper challenges the dominant discourse that HE choice is a consumer choice and questions assumptions underpinning government policy and HE marketing. HE choice is largely viewed as a rational, decontextualized process. However, this interpretivist study found it to be much more complex than this, and to be about relationships and managing a transition in roles. It focuses on parents, an under-researched group, who play an increasing part in their child's HE choice. It finds that they experience this process as parents not consumers, and that their desire to maintain the relationship at this critical juncture takes precedence over the choice of particular courses and universities. The role of relationships, and in this context relationship maintenance, is the main theme. This is experienced in two principal ways - relationship maintenance through conflict avoidance and through teamwork. These are significant findings with implications for the way governments and HEIs consider recruitment.

Introduction

As UK HE becomes marketised and more competitive (Molesworth *et al.* 2011), HEIs need to better understand student decision-making in order to recruit effectively. Some parents play an increasing part in this process (Fearn 2010), yet they are under-researched. There is also an assumption that HE choice is a rational, consumer choice and that more information will lead to 'better' choices (BIS 2016). This study seeks to challenge this assumption and to question the dominant discourses around HE choice, through its in-depth focus on parents' perspectives and on the often ignored choice context: here relationships.

Literature review

Despite moves away from seeing choice as purely rational (Meyer and Kahn 1991), to considering emotional (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and social aspects (Allen, 2002); models of choice and decision-making persist both in marketing (Kotler *et al.* 2012) and HE (Vrontis *et al.* 2007). These models reinforce underlying assumptions of rationality, as do the quantitative methodologies which dominate HE choice research (e.g. Maringe 2006).

Much literature on joint and family decision-making is dated (e.g. Sheth 1974; Spiro 1983). The approach is often quantitative (Ekstrom 2007), lacking focus on the process of decision-making (Hamilton 2009). Influence and conflict avoidance are key concepts and findings include that to avoid conflict, experience and expertise may be sacrificed (Davis 1976).

Method

This study's interpretivist approach purposefully responds to these gaps. 16 parents whose child was undergoing this process were interviewed. Participants were predominantly recruited through a co-educational comprehensive school in southern England. They were all female except one, and were broadly middle class. Phenomenological interviewing generated 27 hours of data. Data analysis followed Thompson *et al.*s (1989; 1990) two-stage process for phenomenological interpretation.

Firstly, an idiographic analysis of each narrative was produced. The second stage consisted of looking for 'global themes' across interviews (*ibid.*).

Findings and discussion

This paper argues for moving beyond the rationality inherent in choice and decision-making models and for more consideration of the choice context. Here the context was the relationship between parent and child, focusing on relationship maintenance, as parents are keenly aware that this relationship is changing. Thus, the processes undertaken to reach decisions and the ways parents engaged with choices need to be seen as part of this liminal phase within this key relationship. Relationship maintenance was experienced in two overlapping ways: through conflict avoidance and teamwork.

Relationship maintenance through conflict avoidance. Parents described going to considerable lengths to avoid conflict in order to maintain this relationship. This was experienced in two primary ways; through persuasion and compromise.

Persuasion was about parents being careful with when and how they started and framed discussions, "*he's got to be in the right frame of mind to want to chat to me*" (Sarah).

Tactics they employed to persuasively facilitate discussions, included taking advantage of car journeys:

...we'd be driving to school...and I'd be saying, well, obviously you've only got a couple of weeks,...have you made your choices...and I'm...trying to eke out of her what she's deciding...
(Mary),

or the presence of visitors, who could ask questions that parents couldn't "*...[visitor] will say it and say what I want, but because it doesn't come from me I'm happier...*" (Sarah).

Reasons for the heavy use of persuasion include that as the relationship is changing, parents are unsure about how best to engage with their child and also that this is a choice with which the child needs to be happy.

Compromise. There were several types of compromise. One was when parents decided which of the many choices to get involved in and which to leave to the child. This even included compromising when they felt the child was making mistakes, but in order to maintain the relationship, they kept quiet.

However, some parents had to compromise on aspects of the choice which did matter to them, leaving them feeling "*a bit redundant...*" (Wendy). Mary echoes this:

...so it would have been a safer back-up and I suppose because she isn't very chatty and responsive we've sort of very much left it up to her, and...now, I do have a little regret...

Relationship Maintenance through teamwork. Another way that experiences of HE choice are shown to be about relationship maintenance, is to consider teamwork. Teamwork was experienced in different ways, including times when parent and child worked well together and times when they did not. One or other could lead the process and this could vary; including each party focusing on different things e.g. a '*parent type*' focus on employment. Teamwork also reflected differing levels of involvement, with some parents having to get heavily involved:

When we were looking through the prospectuses this was me going through the options and him just not being prepared to look...So in a sense I...had to do that for him I felt... (Sarah).

Whereas other parents had little involvement. How involved parents wanted or needed to be depended on the child and their relationship.

Conclusion and implications

This study's findings underline the importance of deeply contextualising choice, here through focussing on relationships, an often neglected area in choice and HE literature, which mainly assumes that choices are rational and individual. Rather than being a consumer process, as governments and HEIs assume, it was experienced by parents as part of parenting and about trying to maintain this core relationship at a time of change.

Policy-makers and HEIs need to understand that this is not purely rational and that parents' involvement is not necessarily leading to more informed processes, as parents will compromise in order to maintain the relationship. Providing more information as the White Paper advises (BIC, 2016), may simply overwhelm or confuse rather than either create a market or lead to the 'right' decision. HEIs need to recognise the importance of relationship maintenance and to consider how they might attempt to facilitate this through their communications. They also need to be aware that just as there is no single 'prospective candidate', there are many sorts of parent, with different types and levels of involvement.

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Biography

Helen Haywood is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing. Her expertise is in International Marketing. She has recently completed a Doctorate in Education at the University of Southampton, where her thesis investigated parents' experiences of their child's Higher Education choice process. Her research interests lie within the area of student choice and decision-making in UK HE, including an interest in the marketization of HE and its impact.