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# ***Parental influence on HE decision making: The continuing power of local culture.***

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## **Introduction**

There has been a great deal written about parental influence and whether parents play an important role in individuals' choices when deciding whether to participate in Higher Education (HE) (Archer, 2003; Brooks, 2003). This paper seeks to explore why a group of young adults, with level 3 qualifications, living within traditionally working-class communities in the north of England, choose not to participate in HE, and concentrates on the influence that parents have on such decisions. A number of authors have illustrated how young adults have been shown to rate their parents as the source of information that they would listen to most when deciding about HE participation (McShane, 2003; Dodgson 2004). This paper discusses the continuing importance of parental influence and highlights how objective social structures such as the family can influence values, cultural rules and decision making pertaining to HE participation. This paper indicates that the majority of participants had strong affective bonds with their parent(s) and it appeared that specific dispositions had been formed that endowed a sense of solidarity in both the participants and their parent(s), what Bourdieu (1998) called a 'family feeling'.

## **Methodology and data collection**

This qualitative research draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who suggests that the two orders, objectivity and subjectivity, are "...tied together through actual social practices, wherein objective social relations are produced and reproduced within particular situations" (Layer, 2006, p.194). Therefore, this paper considers the subjective points of view of the young adults, but also pays attention to factors which appeared to have shaped and moulded the 36 participants' participation decisions (Herzberg, 2006). This paper utilises some of Bourdieu's relational thinking tools to interrogate the decision making of the participants. Particular attention was paid to practice, field, habitus, capital and symbolic violence, "...to effect the synthesis of objectivism and subjectivism..." (Wacquant, 2008, p. 267). A general thematic approach was employed to analyse the qualitative data, this allowed the examination of the ways in which events, realities, meanings and experiences impact upon the participants' decision making (Braun and Clarke (2006).

## **Findings**

The quotes that are referred to within this paper were chosen because they were the most interesting and they best represented the participants' points of view. The main themes that emerged from the data were: rules, values and expected behaviours; the appearance of initial support; lack of parental information about university and abandoning the family.

### *Rules, values and expected behaviours*

In keeping with Brennan's (2005) work on the influence of local culture which is broadly represented by rules, values and expected behaviours, for the majority of participants (25-36 participants), it appeared to be an expected behaviour that they placed value on the opinions of their parents. The values of the young adults appeared to have been moulded by the parent(s) and this, in turn, influenced the rules and behaviours which were deemed to be acceptable, particularly when it came to employment and their families. As participant 18 contends:

...it shows more initiative if you've gone straight into employment into something that you want to do and want to learn from the bottom up...not many people nowadays will take the lowest jobs and work their way up. My mam thinks that's the best way to go.

Implicit within the interview testimonies was the respect participants had for their parent(s) opinion and how important their family members were to each other. This is illustrated by participants 16 and 21:

Family is important to me... They're really important to me; I trust them. I know if I have any problems about anything that they will sort it out for me.

I do what my mam and dad tell me and we all do what my nannan says.

Whilst participant 21 was discussing the family dynamic in a 'tongue in cheek' manner, a mutual respect seemed to exist within their family. This was also apparent within the families of other participants; they appeared to perceive things in the same way and even express things in a similar manner. The participants seemed to have strong affective bonds with their parent(s).

### *The appearance of initial support*

Whilst ultimately, the young adults chose not to participate, there seemed to be, if taken at face value, evidence of clear, initial support from the parent(s) of the participants in relation to them participating in HE. Significantly, all 36 of the participants cited discussing the possibility of HE participation with their parent(s) and it seems to be clear that the parent(s), in the main, gave the impression that they wanted their children to participate. As participant 5 points out:

Well, my mam she'll just go 'oh get yourself gone' and that's all she'll say –'it'll be good for you.

This is important because whilst it seemed clear that the participants placed great value on the opinions and points of view of their parent(s), they still chose not to participate. In a significant number (13-24 participants) of cases, participants did not seem to believe that their parents really did want them to participate in HE, and this seemed to influence their decision making. Participants 16 and 35 illustrate this well:

I asked my dad if he would really be happy if I went to university and he said so, but he said that he was right worried about the cost of uni and had I thought about getting a job, or even staying at college.

...I'm not sure that I really believe them. My mam is always on about Tesco's and how I could get a good job there and work myself up.

Interestingly, once the participants told their parent(s) that they did not intend to participate in HE, their parent(s) appeared to have made no attempt to change their minds, or encourage them to rethink their choice in relation to HE participation - the participants were quickly steered towards employment. To some extent, this backs up the participants' belief that their parent(s) did not want them to participate. The majority of the participants appeared to believe that their parent(s) would prefer them to get a job, earn money and to stay in their locality, rather than participate in HE - this seemed to be a cultural rule. It appears that for the parent(s), the most valuable skills and rewards were likely to be gained in the world of work which is, of course, inextricably linked to economic capital. As participant 4 states:

... when I said that I...didn't want to go to uni they were like, well we don't mind you not going as long as you get a full time job and you're doing something...

#### *Lack of parental information about university*

Whilst the participants discussed the importance of parents' opinions, significantly, none of the parents seemed to be able to tell their children much about participation in HE. As participant 30 points out:

My mum's told me some things about university that probably could've encouraged me to go. She says it will help me get a job, but she didn't tell me much about it to be honest...

It became clear that very few of the participants could articulate, with any real clarity or conviction, why they viewed parents as an appropriate source of information regarding HE. Participants did not seem to know what it was they were hoping to glean from their parent(s) and why it was so important that they "...get their blessing" (participant 25). The testimony of participant 33 helps to illustrate this point:

Both my mam and dad want me to go to uni. I don't know why though; they don't seem to be able to tell me about it, other than I should give it a go.

Of the 36 participants interviewed, none of their parents had participated in HE in any capacity and it was clear that parents were not good sources of information when it came to HE, even though the participants appeared to crave their opinions.

#### *Abandoning the family*

There is some evidence to suggest that many working-class parents, whilst wanting their children to participate in HE, fear that they would abandon their family and the norms and values that they held (Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Crozier *et al.*, 2010). In trying to explain their thoughts about parental attitudes in regard to this issue, a minority (1-12) of participants, either directly or indirectly, referred to how HE participation might change them and how this impacted on their HE participation decision making as they

were worried about what their parents might think. This is illustrated by participants 12 and 29:

I was having a bit of a laugh with my dad about it and he told me, don't be getting all posh on me if you go to uni...I told him, not likely...I'm a Barnsley lad.

I think my mam is worried that I might change and if I go to uni I might, might not live near her and my Dad...that really worries her...

## **Discussion**

Whilst I am aware that gathering data via semi-structured interviews can limit the claims and assertions that can legitimately be made and that this, to an extent, limits this paper's ability to provide conclusive evidence. However, after accepting these caveats, this research nevertheless sheds further light on the influence that parents can have on HE participation decisions.

As discussed, the influence that parents had on the participants' decision making, with respect to HE participation, was inferred throughout the interview testimony, both directly and indirectly. All 36 participants outlined conversations with their parent(s) but, not surprising, as none of the parents had participated in HE, they did not appear to be able to pass on the information that the participants craved: the tacit knowledge that only really comes when you participate yourself that lets you know what university is really like (Reay, 1998). Whilst the participants had some understanding of what HE participation might involve for them, they would never fully know what to expect until they were able to obtain the information they would have found most legitimate, from their parent(s), or at least this is how it seemed.

For Bourdieu and Wacquant (1989), capital confers a power over a particular field, within the field of HE, the participants' parents have no cultural capital whatsoever. Therefore, it is likely that they were unaware of the rules and the functioning of the field and, whilst a minority seemed to have an idea of the potential profits engendered in the field of HE, the majority of parents seemed not to. Unlike middle-class parents who are likely to be familiar with the field of HE, how it is organised and understand the correct way of doing things, what Bourdieu (1984) called 'legitimate culture'; the participants' parents did not. This is perhaps a reason why the young adults appeared to receive much less advice about HE participation from their parents than was required to make an informed decision about it (Crozier *et al.*, 2010). The majority of the participants' parents did not seem to have extensive resources of social and cultural capital that they could draw on in the pursuit of information regarding HE, which they could then pass onto the participants (Reay, 1998).

As touched upon, whilst it seemed clear that the participants held their parents' opinions in very high regard and whilst the impression given was that parents would support their children should they wish to participate in HE, the participants still chose not to participate. If the participants were to be believed, parent(s) always seemed to have something to say, some advice to give or an opinion. Participants were used to parent(s) telling them what they thought and felt; this appeared to be the norm - a

cultural rule. Their lack of advice and guidance, on this occasion, seemed to disorient the participants and make them disbelieve their parents. They appear to have taken a lack of parental information about HE as an indication of their parents not wanting them to participate; this appeared to indirectly influence their participation decision. A common pattern of reaction to this lack of information was non-participation and this seemed to have its own intrinsic logic (Bourdieu, 1977; 1990a; 1990b). It appeared that a particular type of cultural capital and ethos had been transmitted to the participants from their parents and such internalised values appear to have contributed to the participants' attitudes towards HE participation. The impression given was that this was reciprocal, as one of the motivations behind non-participation seemed to be based on the expectation that their family would suffer should they participate, both financially (Callender and Jackson, 2008) and because of the potential for those who participate to abandon family norms and values (Thomas and Quinn, 2007).

For the majority of the participants, a degree of interpersonal proximity was evident within their lives. It seemed that they lived and socialised in the same place and appeared to have developed similar dispositions and outlooks. The habitus of the participants appears to have been shaped through social interaction within their family with whom they had developed relationships and who also appeared to have the same limited amounts of capital, so it is not altogether unexpected that they could not get the information they required from their parents. Participants listened to and valued what parents had to say there was a common understanding and a mutual respect that was conceptualised in a set of practices that manoeuvred the participants, in this particular instance, away from HE participation and towards the world of work. What could be viewed as a personal decision seemed to have been influenced by social activities within their families (Heath, Fuller and Johnston, 2010; Fuller, 2011). Whilst there is likely to be some variation in the participants' habitus that might be the result of what Bourdieu described as cultural peculiarities that distinguish them from each other, the participants seem to have, nonetheless, collectively developed a sense of what was and what was not for the likes of them (Crossley, 2012).

As a result of the dispositions and values that seem to be present within the majority of the participants, they seem to be responding to the cultural rules that dictate how they should respond to their parent(s) (Cuff *et al.*, 2006; Webb *et al.*, 2002). Their habitus was embodied; it impacted on the way they acted, on what they said and did, thought and felt. It appeared to capture how the participants carried their history and how they brought this history into their present circumstances (Maton, 2012). The participants' habitus predisposed them to behave in a particular manner; employment was much more likely to bestow economic, social and cultural capital. In *Practical Reason* (1998), Bourdieu refers to 'the family feeling' and makes reference to language that families use about the family and that, as an active agent, it is capable of thought, feeling and action and that it is a place of trusting and giving. A sense of family seems to have been inculcated in a majority of the participants because of socialisation with the family and this appears to have influenced and constituted elements of their habitus, both in an individual sense and collectively within the family.

Various pedagogic processes seem to have taken place that appear to have been misrecognised as legitimate by the participants which have influenced their attitudes

and beliefs pertaining to HE participation. It was the pedagogic authority of the parent(s), in the eyes of their children, which allowed the informal learning (pedagogic action) that took place to be viewed as being legitimate. It may be that their pedagogic ethos predisposes them towards work rather than HE and a recognition that education is only truly of value if it translates positively into the labour market.

## Conclusions

This paper illustrates the continuing importance of parental influence and highlights how objective social structures such as the family can influence values, cultural rules and decision making. The participants' values appeared to have been shaped and moulded by their parent(s) and as a result, the values they held dear and the behaviours that they deemed to be acceptable. They seemed to be responding to cultural rules that dictated how they should respond to their parent(s) (Cuff *et al.*, 2006; Webb *et al.*, 2002). This paper has proposed that the majority of participants had strong affective bonds with their parent(s) and it appeared that specific dispositions had been formed that endowed a sense of solidarity in both the participants and their parent(s), what Bourdieu called a 'family feeling'. It seemed, to all intents and purposes, that the majority of participants had developed common patterns of reaction that they shared in relation to parental attitudes to participation in HE (Bourdieu; 1977; 1990a; 1990b). This research indicates that in spite of initial support pertaining to HE participation, participants' parents appeared to quickly exhibit collective expectations and socially inculcated beliefs (Bourdieu, 1998) pertaining to employment and the need to earn money and not be in debt. The socialisation that took place in the family made participants believe that non-participation was best and that employment was the right thing to do. It appeared to be the pedagogic authority of the parent(s), in the eyes of the young adults which allowed the informal learning that took place to be viewed as being legitimate. Without them consciously planning the way in which they did things, practices which appeared to have their own built-in and intrinsic logic seemed to steer them towards the world of work. Such decisions seeming rational, they made sense to the participants.

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