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Introduction

The paper combines robust statistical analysis with theoretical groundings to explore changes in boys' EA over time. It reports on the results of a study using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) dataset. The sample included 7977 boys surveyed annually over a three year span. In the first instance, these boys were interviewed at age 13/14 in year 9 across maintained and independent schools along with pupil referral unit (PSU) in England during the month of February 2004 (DfE 2011). These three years were critical for the study as it encapsulate the period where EA becomes more 'realistic' in relation to boys' level of capital, experiences of structures within their field, personal factors like ethnicity and social class etc., which impact on agencies and influence behaviour. Practically, this is the period where pupils think about and move on to select year 10 subjects for their final exams at the end of compulsory schooling at age 15/16. The study attempted to 'capture' aspiration at the beginning (age 13/14) and end (age 15/16) of this phase, measured as a binary outcome: having EA or little/no EA. Two-level and three-level random effect and random slope logit models were used to explore the difference between (and within) the EA of boys from various ethnic groups over time. A variety of factors were controlled for: special educational needs (SEN), social-class, truancy, exclusion and parental aspirations/expectations. The paper grounds the findings within a Bourdieuan theoretical framework, supported by a critical realist ontology. This unique combination of theories provides a multi-layered approach through which the concepts were explored systematically and holistically.

Background

EA was operationalised as the highest level of education (usually post 16) a student hopes, intends and/or expects to achieve upon completion of her/his studies. This was in relation to how EA was perceived within the context of the LSYPE where it was measured based on an overarching question: *When you're 16 and have finished Year 11 at school what do you want to do next?* Simply put, the options included staying in full-time-education (FTE) or not. Then specifically: *How likely do you think it is that you will ever apply to go to university to do a degree?* In this manner, EA was operationalised as an intention towards higher education (HE) as opposed to a specific look on career, occupation or vocation. The literature characterises aspirations as inherently developmental, evolving and adapting to new experiences and beliefs as children matures. This maturation process is difficult to capture without a longitudinal focus and even then this provides only a snapshot into an intricate, dynamic process that goes beyond the agent themselves. The boys in the LSYPE study either had an intention or not towards moving into HE, but how was this agency shaped? These ideas were conceptualised through a Bourdieuan discussion of structure, agency and capital and enhanced by a Critical Realist ontology to support the manner in which the research was undertaken. That is, the notion of aspiration though whimsical, exists and may be ascertained through an exploration and measurement of the dynamic forces impacting on its existence.

Theoretical Orientation

Bhaskar's (1993) Transformative Model of Social Activity (TMSA) addresses the issue of separation between structure and agency; in that, society cannot exist without the individual and vice versa. This means that although the duality between structure and agency is maintained, they are also entwined as neither can exist on its own. Bourdieu's (1992) theory of practice also looks at this duality without the use of objectivism and subjectivism, by beginning with practice. Practice is action or behaviour on the part of agents which occurs consciously or unconsciously, based on habits or experiences, i.e., 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu's focus on 'practice' as an entrance to understanding society seems more in line with a critical realist viewpoint to begin with reality and what is observable; and emphasising a deeper sociological outlook at the level of the agent in relation to their field and habitus. As Bhaskar discussed, scientific knowledge is progressive and discoverable but socially mediated through the transitive dimension; so research always begins from exploring reality (ontology) to theorising about it. Bourdieu's (1977) explanation of practice begins with his

notion of 'field' and 'habitus' (Archer, et al, 1998; Bhaskar, 1991, 1997; Bourdieu, 1977; 1990b). For Bourdieu, the concept of a field is quite layered and based on the different existing social forces (social structures and capitals) exerting their influence on the agent, internalised to create the habitus (disposition or trait developed through the agent primary and secondary socialization), and externalised by the habitus through agency and practice; henceforth, exerting its influence within this field. In this respect, Bourdieu's theoretical standpoint fits within the multi-level perspective of research such as that implied by Bhaskar's CR as they identify the role of multiple factors interacting and impacting on the agent in different ways; in this case boys' EA over time.

Discussion and Finding

Preliminary findings suggested that boys' EA changes based on a dynamic, complex interrelation between structure, agencies and personal factors beyond their control. Some of the general findings were: boys' likelihood of EA reduced with age, having a statement of SEN, exclusion, truancy, being White-British and White/Black Caribbean. On the other hand, it increased with parental aspirations/expectations, higher social-class and belonging to any ethnic minority groups in comparison to White-British. Specifically, Black-African, Indian and Chinese boys tended to show the highest likelihood of EA. These findings supported recent research in the literature identifying BME boys as having high EA. However, such findings are not unanimous within a diverse BME group with White-Black Caribbean boys having the lowest likelihood of EA even after controlling for a variety of factors. The paper offers an interesting combination of statistical findings supported by rigorous theoretical insights. The study has implications for practitioners, local community groups and policymakers. Further research is required to explore the interrelation between their EA and educational/labour market outcomes.