Creating a Sense of Place: the role of personal tutors and social networks (0623)

Ciaran Burke[1] [1]*University of Derby, United Kingdom*

Higher Education is an opportunity for many to become socially mobile or to cut a different path which would have historically been taken. By design, higher education, when accessed through widening participation, is a foreign institution, a place which people are often trying to make sense of and confirm a sense of belonging. Akin to other elite institutions, higher education operates through unwritten rules and tacit expectations (Bourdieu, 1974). Previous research has illustrated the difficulties "non-traditional" students experience when trying to navigate such structures, resulting in issues of well-being, retention and attainment (Reay, *et al.,* 2009; Bathmaker, *et al.,* 2016; Waller, *et al.,* 2017).

In the context of the reproduction of social inequalities, contrary to the widening participation agenda, additional support for "non-traditional" students during their time in higher education is required. The issue is further complicated through the tendency for students to prefer support and guidance from academic staff rather than dedicated staff from various iterations of student services (Purcell *et al,* 2013; Dent, 2017). As such, the role of personal tutors provides key support and guidance for non-traditional students to successfully make the initial and sustained transition to higher education.

While personal tutors carry the potential to act as gatekeepers to non-traditional students, the relative impact of their support and guidance needs to be considered within students' wider social networks and sources of information. Drawing on previous arguments (Fuller, Heath and Johnston 2011) on the role of social networks in widening participation, this paper is based on an empirical research project examining the effectiveness of personal tutors in the context of a student's wider social network. Based in university in the North East of England, the research project will measure the cumulative impact of both personal tutors and key actors within students' social network on student identities and attitudes. The research will be supported through a qualitative application of Scott's (2013) social network analysis where a relational analysis focusing on contacts, ties and connections will be applied. The research focus and analysis are driven by three competing but complementary theoretical contributions:

- Hot knowledge – Ball and Vincent (1998) discuss the friction between hot knowledge (information from individuals and informal sources) and cold knowledge (information from written/official source). The authors contend that individuals both favour hot knowledge and welcome such information from individuals who share demographic characteristics – the main issue remains, as Reay, *et al.* (2005) argue, that such preferences and exchanges reproduce position within social space.

- Communicative reflexivity – a central tenant within Margaret Archer's critical realist model of a Morphogenetic Society (1996, 2003, 2007) is reflexivity: an individual's awareness of social space and ability to navigate an increasingly fractured and fluid set of social structures. One type of reflexivity is Communicative reflexivity – a form of reflexivity where such awareness and actions are created and employed through

conversations with others. While Archer concedes that conversations tend to take place between those who share demographic characteristics, Kahn (2017) suggests a possible framework for social mobility through adjusting the actors in the conversation.

- Collective habitus – an equally central tenant within Pierre Bourdieu's structural constructivist model of practice (1977, 1984) is habitus: an individual's norms, values and dispositions influenced by family, school, peers and environment. While the habitus is understood to be durable in nature, Bourdieu maintains that a significant out-of-environment experience can alter the habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). However, Bourdieu cautions against the difficulty in such an alteration taking place; the collective form of habitus, he argues, moves in unison to quickly quell dissent from an individual member of the group, reinforcing the "original" habitus and reproducing position within social space.

The paper will provide a theoretically-informed account of the role of personal tutors and a critique of widening participation interventions which do not consider the relational impact of actors outside of an intervention.

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