

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Social network analysis methods and the geography of education: regional divides and elite circuits in the school to university transition in the UK

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Abstract: This paper uses social network analysis methods to explore how the spatial mobility of students to attend university creates regional divisions and socio-spatial hierarchies of schools and universities. We use community detection methods to examine clusters or ‘communities’ of areas that students move between to attend university, detecting areas which are more densely connected than would be expected at random. These communities suggest how student migration to attend university in the UK primarily operates along regional lines. Applying this method to schools and universities suggests a distinctive cluster of elite schools and universities operating separately from the more regional recruitment patterns of most universities. We combine this quantitative analysis with qualitative data from a multi-sited study of student mobility to university across the UK. Our paper provides a rich empirical and theoretical picture of how regional cultural divisions and processes of elite formation occur in the spatial transition to university.

Paper: In this paper we explore how social network analysis (SNA) can be used to examine how the moment of transition between school and university is a moment of regional boundary formation. We also use SNA methods to examine the spatial hierarchies of schools and universities institutions that are apparent as students move into higher education. Regional circuits of higher education involving mostly newer, less prestigious universities and state schools sit alongside a distinctive national set of elite English universities and elite private and state schools. These distinctive patterns of recruitment by elite universities from elite schools suggest distinctive ‘circuits of power’ running between certain de facto ‘feeder schools’ and particular universities. Using SNA techniques alongside rich qualitative data allows us to develop a detailed picture of the relational construction of place and the construction of distinct geographies of class formation within the spatial transition from home to university.

From a theoretical and an empirical perspective, our analysis seeks to tie together analyses of student

mobility (Holdsworth, 2009; Holton & Finn, 2017), regional geography (D. Massey, 1995; Paasi, 2003) and the analysis of elite formation through education (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015; Wakeling & Savage, 2015). The approach taken here seeks to develop an approach to analysing how the geographies of higher education are embedded in the political economy of regional economic division and the geographies of class formation. Until now, regional geographies of higher education have largely focussed on the economic role of universities within their own region (Boucher, Conway, & Van Der Meer, 2003). Graduate migration patterns have also received substantial attention (Hoare & Corver, 2010) and the analysis of youth migration for university has also received more attention (Ciriaci, 2014; Liu et al 2017). The analysis of higher education and the region has not often sought to understand the role universities play in reinforcing cultural differences and regional divides. What we explore here is how the moment of spatial transition to university represents a moment during which regional boundaries are created and how these regional boundaries are tied into patterns of class formation. The mass movement of students from home to university in the UK is precisely a moment during which historical and cultural regional divisions both shape students' choices and are in turn re-created amongst a new generation of young people.

Amongst these regional divisions that are evident in the transition to university, we also examine the distinctive patterns of spatial movement between elite schools and universities. These suggest that, in England at least, elite reproduction through the education system occurs in ways that are not strictly embedded within a particular region, though they are undoubtedly strongest in London and the South-East. Recent analyses of elite education have begun to explore the geography of elite education (Giesecking, 2007), but this research has not been able to explore these geographies without anonymising schools and locales. Our analysis thus seeks to explore the school to university geography of elite university attendance which has been implied but not explored empirically in recent papers within the sociology of elite formation (Wakeling & Savage, 2015). Using social network methods as our methodological lens we stitch together regional economic geography, the student mobilities literature and the sociological and geographical analysis of elite education. This requires combining a range of theoretical and empirical literature to develop a rich interdisciplinary analysis of how the moment of transition to university represents an intertwined moment of regional and class boundary formation.

Through the use of exploratory social network analysis alongside qualitative data from a multi-sited study of the geography of the transition from school to higher education, we provide a new lens through which to understand the geography of higher education. The social network analysis methods allow us to examine how recruitment by universities functions along regional lines, with these regional circuits of higher education suggesting that student movements form regional boundaries. It thus becomes possible to see how the moment of transition to university is a moment in which old and new spatial, social and cultural divisions are created and enacted. In Massey's (2005) terms, place is formed through the accumulation of meetings, the mesh of repeated flows of people, and attending university is a moment of place and boundary formation. The geography of the student transition is not in some way separate from broader cultural and economic regional divides, rather the geography of student mobility to attend university *creates* regional boundaries and entrenches institutional hierarchies.

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