

Habitus, helicopters and wholesale escape: critiquing social mobility through elite higher education in another country

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

We will draw on interviews with 10 students from low income households in the UK who were supported to access elite higher education in the US through a charity-led social mobility programme. The students were interviewed during their studies and again around a year after graduation. With one possible exception, all had enjoyed substantial upward mobility, but connections to their original communities had diminished or disappeared.

We will use Bourdieu's concept of the 'cleft habitus' to explore the impact of the students' experiences during and after their studies. We will argue that rather than experiencing discomfort through a radical shift in field, the students underwent a 'wholesale escape' of their original habitus. We will then propose the concept of 'helicopter mobility' to describe programmes that seek to remove (or, perhaps, rescue) people from their original context without affecting their community or wider structures of inequality.

Full paper

Bourdieu's original conception of the habitus was of 'an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and

therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.133).

These dispositions 'tend to perpetuate, to reproduce themselves, but they are not eternal' (Bourdieu, 2005, p.45). While habitus for many remains a lifelong anchor of knowledge, values and behaviour, it is possible for individuals to have transformative experiences.

Bourdieu examined marked changes in field, leading to a sudden shock to habitus as the individual attempts to learn the rules of the new game. He suggests that the result may be a 'cleft, tormented habitus bearing in the form of tensions and contradictions the mark of the contradictory conditions of formation of which they are the product' (Bourdieu, 2000, p.64).

Social mobility programmes are often founded around the principle of exposing disadvantaged individuals to transformative experiences that reveal 'better' futures. Privilege is afforded to elite form of experience, perhaps in the belief that the more radical the disjuncture with the individual's life, the more transformation will occur. In this paper, we consider young people who are doubly mobile, moving from low income families to enter elite institutions in another country; not only a move associated with social class transition, but also exposing them to new cultural mores and practices. Such individuals might be particularly susceptible to developing a 'cleft habitus'. However, Ingram and Abrahams (2016, p.150) argue that changing fields may actually trigger an abandoned habitus where 'the structures of the new field become internally dominant [while] the old/original structures are usurped or overwritten'.

To explore this question, we draw on empirical data from two waves of semi-structured interviews with ten UK students who studied in elite US universities. This was facilitated by a charity-led social mobility programme that targeted high-achieving young people from low income households. We interviewed the participants online in the first or second year of their studies and again around a year after graduation. Six remained in the US for work or postgraduate study, while four had returned to the UK. Those still in the US generally had no intention of returning to the UK, while several in the UK were anticipating future international moves. With one possible exception, all had experienced significant upward social mobility and

were enjoying a prestigious lifestyle.

There was little evidence for the cleft habitus as envisaged by Bourdieu. Our participants were already making a smooth transition to their new field at the first interview and this was largely complete at the second. Removal from their social context had allowed them to leave behind social cues like accent and they were readily accepted into their new communities. They had developed social networks in the US which effectively replaced those in the UK, often speaking of how hard this was for their families, but that it was not a challenge for them; they had made a 'wholesale escape' from their abandoned habitus. Those who had returned to the UK reported finding the transition back as being somewhat harder as they were now physically distant from their new field, but socially distant from their original one.

We conclude that the charity programme was very successful in its own terms for the individuals that we interviewed. However, only one participant had returned to their own community and, arguably, they showed the greatest evidence for a cleft habitus and least social mobility. Aside from a couple of gentle ripples, impact on the structures of inequality was therefore almost entirely absent.

Precisely because of their 'wholesale escape', our participants were not present in their original communities to inspire others or work for social change.

Contextualising our study in the wider domain of social mobility programmes, we adopt the metaphor of a helicopter that hovers unimpeded over disadvantaged communities without engaging with them. The pilot identifies the individual they are seeking and drops down a ladder; the helicopter only has room for one passenger at a time. It seamlessly leaves the community, transporting the individual elsewhere with minimal impact on the streets and people left behind; the drama of the flight suggests something like a rescue has taken place. Our argument is that 'helicopter mobility' can provide positive outcomes for individuals (and the organisations supporting them), but it does little to challenge dominant and persistent structures of inequality; the helicopter must return each year afresh.

References

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