

'Home', university choice and spatial mobility (0100)

This paper considers the ways in which young people's decisions about HE are intimately bound up with their (anticipated) spatial practices (i.e. their anticipated geographical movement from 'home' to university) (Hinton, 2011). It attempts to understand the meaning and significance of 'going away' to university or staying 'close to home' for a sample of largely non-traditional Welsh HE applicants. The opening section of this paper illustrates how young people's emotional relationships with home, in particular, their interpersonal relationships with family and locally based social and kin networks has bearing upon their anticipated 'spatial practices' which are integral to the HE decision making process (Christie, 2007). The paper then goes on to suggest that for some young people, Welsh HEIs and 'local' HEIs are constructed as 'home-like' (Blunt and Varely, 2004) and therefore attending a university which is 'close to home' or within Wales allows a sense of familiarity and security associated with 'home' to be transported from one familiar and known 'place' to another unfamiliar and unknown 'place' (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Blunt and Varely, 2004; Hinton, 2011). It is not argued that the decision to study at a Welsh university for these students reflected strongly nationalist sentiments for a large majority of these students. Nationalist sentiments permeated the narratives of only a small number of students. Rather, the desire to attend a Welsh university overwhelmingly disguised a more mundane preference for a university which is *close to home*, rather than a Welsh university per se. Nonetheless, it is suggested that studying at a Welsh university constituted a 'home-like' experience and offered a sense of familiarity, security and was constructed as a 'comfort zone' for some students thus enabling 'ontological security' to be maintained in the transition to HE (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005).

This paper argues that economic pragmatism is an insufficient explanation for these Welsh applicants overwhelming preference to study at 'local' or Welsh HEIs. The narratives presented by these students suggest that decisions to live at home or to attend a 'local' or Welsh HEI might constitute an economically pragmatic decision for *some* HE applicants. Indeed, the value of living at home in order to reduce living costs whilst at university was articulated by *some* students. For many students, however, economic motives were not the most salient factor informing their preference for 'local' universities. This paper highlights the importance of considering not only how relationships with 'home' have bearing upon university choice, but also how attending a Welsh HEI has emotional and symbolic significance for many students. The paper concludes by arguing that 'place' is important to the HE decision making process and that in order to fully understand decisions made about HE it is important to consider the local contexts in which young people are situated. Moreover, in support for Christie (2007) and Holdsworth (2009), this paper suggest that there is a need to question public and political discourses which map geographical immobility-mobility onto binary distinctions of dependence-independence in which the former is positioned as disadvantage and marginalised practice and the later has hegemonic status and

is constructed as elite practice (Holdsworth, 2009). Whilst this study lends support for existing research which has highlighted the value attached to staying 'local' amongst non-traditional applicants (Pugsley, 1998), it also makes an important departure from it. Much existing literature has suggested that the accomplishment of independence and autonomy is a goal of the middle-class (Pugsley, 1998) but has failed to acknowledge this goal within the aspirations of non-traditional students. The interviews indicate, albeit tentatively, that studying at a university which is 'close to home' is not antagonistic to the achievement of this highly valued 'student experience' in which an independent and autonomous life-style can be forged. This study illustrates that these largely non-traditional HE applicants simultaneously valued the accomplishment of social and emotional independence through going to university whilst also articulating their preference to stay 'close to home' whilst at university, indicating that the student 'experience' can be achieved through making short geographical moves away from home. It is argued therefore that the decision to study at a university which is 'close to home' represents an alternative and valuable option to migration away from home for many students.

This paper hopes to add insight into how decisions about HE are made within local contexts. It hopes to answer the question, why should we be concerned with the spatial location of HE applicants when exploring their decision making processes? It is argued that if geographical mobility and the spatial practices of HE applicants are bound up with the choosing of universities, then it is important to take into account both the local HE markets and the 'regional cultures' of HE participation (Christie, 2007) which young people experience and are situated in. The young people who were involved in this research are arguably situated within a relatively 'rich' HE market which means that they can access universities which are both 'prestigious' and 'close to home'. Moreover, it might be argued that the young people who were involved in the research are situated within a 'regional culture' in which studying 'close to home' is more common practice than other parts of the UK and this may also account for why studying close to home was not perceived as disadvantaged practice in the eyes of these participants. Given that the opportunities available for HE applicants depend on both their attainment as well as their geographical location (Christie, 2007), the geographical location of both applicants and HEIs is particularly important for applicants who are applying to universities which they consider to be local or 'close to home'. This research points to the need to explore the link between social and spatial inequality because the geographical differentiation of HE opportunities becomes particularly salient for the geographically constrained (Christie, 2007).

References

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